CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE
IDEAS FOR EVERY BUDGET

CALL OF DUTY: WWII
STORM THE BEACHES, AGAIN

GEFORCE GTX 1070 TI REVIEWED!
IS THIS THE KILLER NEW GPU?

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

Warhammer: VERMINTIDE II

ONLY YOU CAN SAVE THE EMPIRE WHEN THE FORCES OF CHAOS JOIN THE SKAVEN HORDES

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STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL GAME OF THE YEAR REVIEWED

SEVEN: DAYS LONG GONE

EX-WITCHER DEVS MERGE STEALTH GAMEPLAY AND ISOMETRIC ACTION RPG

PAX INDIES

OUR PICK OF THE MOST EXCITING INDIES OF 2018

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OF
WARSHIPS

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HAS ARRIVED!
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REGISTER NOW AT WORLDOFWARSHIPS.ASIA
INVITE CODE: AUSHIPSNOW

>PCPP #269

ON THE COVER

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Back to the beach

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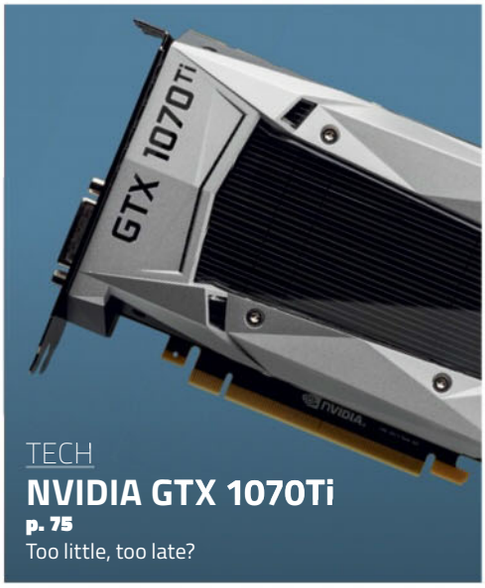
For the living room, kitchen, the whole house



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HUMBUGGERED

There's a theory that time moves more rapidly as people age - the more life people have behind them makes the time they have left feel shorter. When you're a kid the Christmas break lasts forever, but the older you get the more fleeting the days become. That sounds a bit maudlin, but 2017 has been a year that has gone by in a flash. Last week it was January and now I'm here putting the finishing touches on the last regular issue of the year and planning the first of 2018.

Part of the reason that the year has gone by so quickly could be the fact that it has been such a busy year in terms of releases. On the gaming front there have been steady releases throughout the year, with no real flat point, just moments of slowing. On the technology side, 2017 has been a huge year. This year we've had the GTX 10 series cards, the Vega cards, Ryzen chips, Coffee Lake, the requisite new sku of motherboards to support the new chipsets, tonnes of new peripherals, new monitor technology and aspect ratios, faster SSDs and a heap more.

On top of that there has been the consistent rise of esports as a thing, the changing face of the way people interact with games and gaming, and the scandals that have demanded their share of attention, too. There hasn't been time to sit and reflect, as everyday this year has brought something new to monopolise our attention and time. This is why, as I've said so many times in the past, this is such an exciting industry. It moves at the speed of innovation and rarely stops for a breather.

Anyway, now we have to finish off the PCPP Tech Handbook, so have a good Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Festivus, Decemberween, Saturnalia, Yule, Newtonmas, Hogmanay, Chalica, holidays or other festival, celebration or ceremony I may have forgotten.

See you in 2018.

Daniel Wilks
Proto-Santa
@drwilkenstein

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"I always wanted rose gold teeth. That's why I smoke"

"See? I told you it would be fun."

"We now have an official enemy. Remember this."

PC PowerPlay

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SAMSUNG

Introducing Samsung's CFG70 Curved Gaming Monitor

A monitor designed to keep you ahead of the curve and on top of your game

- Curved screen for the ultimate immersive experience
- 144Hz refresh rate and 1MS for smooth gameplay
- Crisp, bright, life-like colours with Quantum dot technology
- Ultra high contrast vertically aligned (VA) panel for extreme wide viewing angles

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

The Samsung CFG70 Curved Gaming Monitor is available in 24" and 27"
Learn more by visiting samsung.com/au

eye candy

A WINNER IS YOU!

Congratulations to the winners of the PCPP 267 subscriptions prize. The winners of the HyperX peripherals packs are:
Mr D. Roberts
Ms I. Bruce

Days of War

www.playdaysofwar.com
Driven Arts, Early Access

Holdfast: Nations at War

www.holdfastgame.com

Anvil Game Studios, Early Access

INTEL TO RELEASE MOBILE CPU WITH AMD RADEON GRAPHICS BUILT-IN

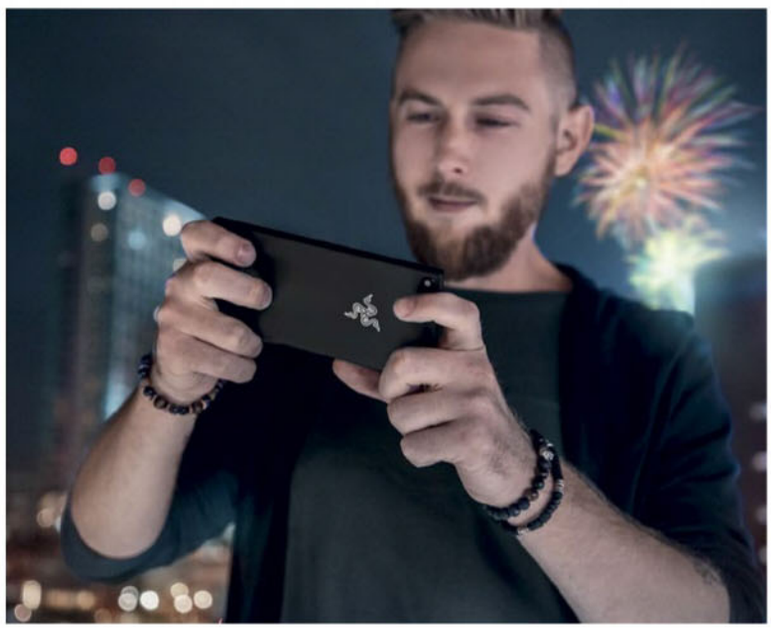
Hell has frozen over with Intel and AMD signing a deal that'll see Intel's 8th Generation laptop CPUs ship with a customised Radeon GPU in the same package. Yep, AMD and Intel, mortal enemies, working together. By combining the GPU and CPU in the same package, Intel claims significant board space will be saved, allowing for smaller, thinner laptops and improved cooling systems to handle increased clock speeds. Due to an advanced power sharing network, these CPUs will be able to automatically engage or disengage the AMD GPU to preserve battery life. Intel and AMD haven't announced which Radeon design will be integrated with Intel's CPUs, but it's likely an AMD Vega GPU with 10 compute units, a slight bump compared to AMD's own Ryzen Mobile APUs currently on the market. The 35W-45W range of mobile chips are the first targets for the Radeon GPUs and are due for release Q1 2018.

LOGITECH AND HTC TO BRING KEYBOARDS INTO VIRTUAL REALITY

Virtual reality is fun and all, but if you need to use the keyboard whilst you're playing a VR game, it's not that easy. With the elaborate Oculus Rift or HTC Vive headset strapped to your noggin, you can't see the keyboard in front of you, so typing in-game is out of the question. Logitech and HTC have teamed up to enable the use of real keyboard with tactile feedback in virtual worlds. The Logitech G Bridge SDK, together with a HTC Vive Tracker tacked to the top left of your keyboard, senses the position of your hands above the keyboard and renders it pixel perfect in your VR game. It sounds great, but unless Logitech and HTC can nail latency, it's going to be pretty darn awkward trying to type without appearing drunk. No word on when this tech will be live in games, but developers can get their hands on the SDK now.

RAZER'S NEW SMARTPHONE FOR GAMERS ON THE GO

Razer is more fondly known for its popular gaming accessories like souped up mice, keyboards, headphones and laptops, has launched a smartphone also aimed at gamers. The Razer Phone has a Qualcomm Snapdragon 835 SoC, a whopping 8GB of LPDDR4 RAM, 64GB of internal UFS storage, dual rear cameras, Qualcomm QuickCharge 4.0+ and a microSD card slot. What gives Razer's phone a unique selling point is the 5.7" IGZO LCD 2560x1440 that supports 120Hz motion, wide colour gamut and protected with Corning's Gorilla Glass 3, together with stereo front facing speakers with dual amplifiers and a USB-C THX certified DAC audio adapter included in the box. The same team who developed the Razer Blade laptop's innovative cooling system has designed a similar custom cooling setup for the Razer Phone that allows the Snapdragon 835 SoC to operate faster without throttling itself down to avoid overheating.



VIVE

Fallout 4 VR

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FREE FALLOUT 4 VR

GET THIS SUMMER'S HOTTEST VR GAME FREE

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VIVE

Offer only available for VIVE purchases made before 11.59pm AEDST 31 December 2017 or while stocks last. Offer is not available for VIVE orders placed after 12.00am AEDST 1 January 2018. Game redemption available until 11.59pm AEDST January 15, 2018. Offer valid on VIVE purchased online via www.vive.com/au only. Offer includes Fallout 4 VR^, Google Tilt Brush, and a Free 1-Month Trial Subscription to VIVEPORT. Limit of one Fallout 4 VR per VIVE purchased. ^Fallout 4 VR is rated MA15+ and you must be 15 years of age or older to redeem. For those under the age of 15, you will receive a copy of Google's Tilt Brush, Everest VR, Richie's Plank Experience and a Free 1-Month Trial Subscription to VIVEPORT.

THE ASUS ROG G703 GAMING LAPTOP IS PRE-OVERCLOCKED FOR YOUR ENJOYMENT

Asus have launched a new ultra-high end gaming laptop - the ROG G703. This beefcake of a machine weighs in at 4.8kg and packs an Intel Core i7-7820HK CPU, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1080 with 8GB GDDR5X memory, 32GB DDR4-2800 RAM, 2x 256GB PCIe SSDs in RAID 0 together with a 1TB SSHD, Thunderbolt 3 and a very fancy RGB-backlit Aura keyboard with 2.5-mm travel, N-key rollover, specially-marked WASD keys and dedicated hotkeys for Xbox Live, XSplit gamecasting and the ROG gaming centre. Besides the lofty specs, what makes this laptop special is the industry's first laptop 17.3" AHVA panel featuring a native 144Hz refresh rate and G-Sync. If you don't need a 144Hz LCD, Asus will have a 4K60 display that supports a wider colour gamut. Thanks to the advanced cooling system in the ROG G703, Asus will ship the laptop pre-overclocked, with the GTX1080 GPU running at 1974MHz, a decent boost from the 1733MHz default.

THE LATEST VERSION OF FIREFOX HAS BEEN RE-WRITTEN FOR PERFORMANCE

Firefox Quantum (v57) is an all new version of Firefox, re-written to be twice the speed as the previous version of Firefox and use 30% less RAM than the latest version of Google's Chrome browser. Mozilla has managed to achieve this by taking advantage of the multiple cores available in recent computers. Take for example rendering CSS - instead of having a single core dedicated to this task, all the little bits of code that make up a website are spread out across all your CPU's cores in parallel. Firefox's UI gets an overhaul too, reflecting today's reality of High DPI displays and users who are more task focused than they've ever been. The new, minimalist design introduces square tabs, smooth animations, and a Library, which provides quick access to bookmarks, history, downloads, tabs, and screenshots. If you've ditched Firefox for another browser, it's a great time to give Firefox another crack.

NVIDIA TO RELEASE LIMITED EDITION STAR WARS BRANDED TITAN XP GRAPHICS CARDS

A new Star Wars film is here and you know what that means: more merchandise. Nvidia's GPUs are the latest target for the Star Wars merchandising machine. Their flagship Titan Xp graphics card now comes in "new physical designs that pay homage to Star Wars" to display "hints of the Star Wars galaxy, such as the hilt of Luke Skywalker's lightsaber and light panels reminiscent of the Death Star." There are two cards, one with a white/silver heatsink reminiscent of the Jedi Order and green LEDs, the other with a dark black heatsink akin to Darth Vader's helmet with red LEDs. That said, the box these graphics cards come in is very fancy, almost like you're not supposed to actually use the card, but keep it in its pristine packaging like a fine wine to accrue in value and sell to a cashed-up Star Wars fan in 30 years.

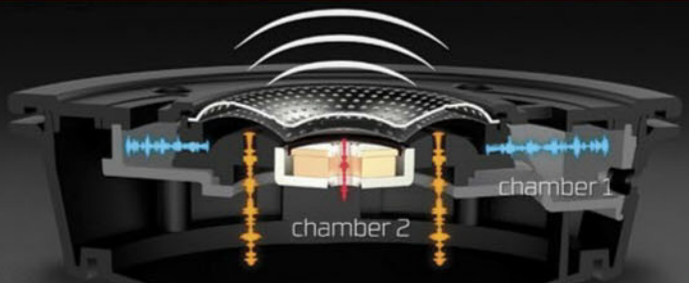
HyperX Cloud Alpha

Pro Gaming Headset

Hear the difference

For More Information

Multi-platform compatibility



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UP YOUR GAME WITH OPTANE

SPEED UP YOUR LOAD TIMES WITH INTEL OPTANE MEMORY

WHAT IS OPTANE?

Intel® Optane ™ is a smart, adaptable system accelerator for PCs with a 7th and 8th Gen Intel Core Processor and a hard disk drive. It provides fast system responsiveness for large capacity storage drives, making everything you do quick, smooth and easy.

THE DUAL DRIVE DILEMA

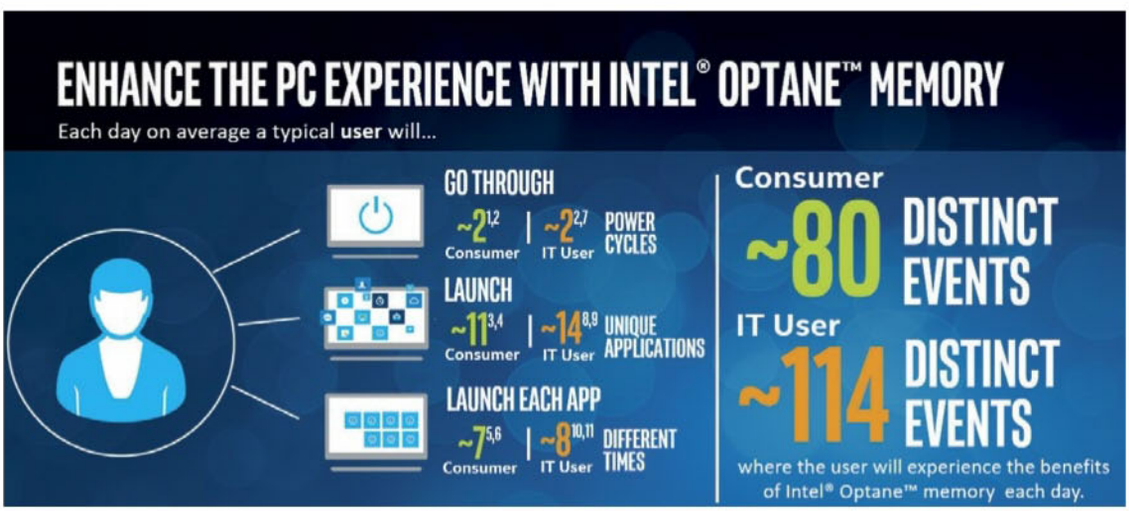
High capacity, high performing local storage is expensive. So, in the past, a computer might offer a 'dual drive' configuration, with a large-capacity hard disk drive to store data and install some applications and games, and a small-capacity SSD for use by the operating system and the most frequently used apps and games. This configuration offered the cost-effective 'mega storage' HDD, for large data files and infrequently used applications, together with faster boot time and rapid application/game launching from the more expensive SSD. The main disadvantage of this configuration is the SSD can quickly run out of storage with only a few apps and games installed. The solution is to manually delete some of the data on the SSD, or move it to the HDD, to make room to install another program you want to run faster.

OPTANE IS THE ANSWER

Today, instead of the dual-drive configuration and the tedious manual file management process required to move apps and games between the HDD and SDD, a computer with Intel® Optane™ memory manages files automatically through an intelligent software algorithm, and no longer requires an SSD for fast OS boot and rapid app and game launching. For intense hardcore gaming and multitasking however check out our new Intel Optane SSD900P Series which offers the best of both worlds.

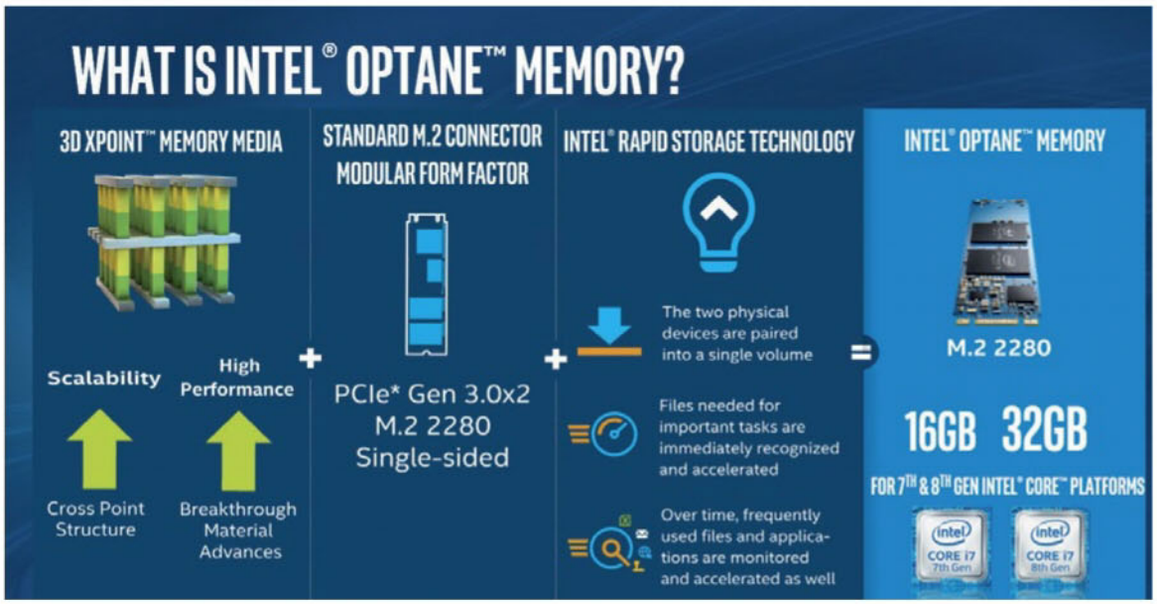
WHEN DOES IT KICK IN?

Through the course of an average day your PC can conduct an average of 80 different operations, and Intel® Optane ™ is there providing a boost in every case.


ENHANCE THE PC EXPERIENCE WITH INTEL® OPTANE™ MEMORY
Each day on average a typical user will...
GO THROUGH
~2^1,2 Consumer | ~2^2,7 IT User POWER CYCLES
LAUNCH
~11^3,4 Consumer | ~14^8,9 IT User UNIQUE APPLICATIONS
LAUNCH EACH APP
~7^5,6 Consumer | ~8^10,11 IT User DIFFERENT TIMES
Consumer
~80 DISTINCT EVENTS
IT User
~114 DISTINCT EVENTS
where the user will experience the benefits of Intel® Optane™ memory each day.

WHAT PERFORMANCE BENEFITS WILL YOU SEE?

In almost every situation Intel Optane delivers a significant performance increase, and an PC equipped with Intel® Optane ™ can be up to 67% faster than a PC without Intel® Optane ™.


WHAT IS INTEL® OPTANE™ MEMORY?
3D XPOINT™ MEMORY MEDIA
Scalability
High Performance
Cross Point Structure
Breakthrough Material Advances
STANDARD M.2 CONNECTOR MODULAR FORM FACTOR
PCIe* Gen 3.0x2
M.2 2280
Single-sided
INTEL® RAPID STORAGE TECHNOLOGY
The two physical devices are paired into a single volume
Files needed for important tasks are immediately recognized and accelerated
Over time, frequently used files and applications are monitored and accelerated as well
INTEL® OPTANE™ MEMORY
M.2 2280
16GB 32GB
FOR 7TH & 8TH GEN INTEL® CORE™ PLATFORMS

Everyday **Tasks**[1]	Up to **2x More Responsive**
Storage **Performance**[2]	Up to **14x Faster**
Computer **Boot Time**[3]	Up to **2x Faster**
Launch **Web Browser**[4]	Up to **5x Faster**
Launch **Game**[5]	Up to **67% Faster**
Game **Level Load**[5]	Up to **65% Faster**
Open Large **Media Projects**[6]	Up to **4.1x Faster**
Launch **Email**[7]	Up to **5.8x Faster**
Launch **Presentations**[8]	Up to **3.8x Faster**
Windows* **File Search**[9]	Up to **4x Faster**

CONFIGURATION	Intel® Optane™
Dual-Drive Configuration SSD + HDD (with supported processors and chipsets)	**Intel® Optane™ memory + HDD** Get high performance and large capacity storage without having to manage files
Standalone HDD Configuration (with supported processors and chipsets)	**Intel® Optane™ memory + HDD** Get high performance and large capacity storage
Standalone SATA SSD Configuration (with supported processors and chipsets)	**Intel® Optane™ memory + SATA SSD** Get high performance and eliminate the SATA-interface read bottleneck
Standalone SSHD Configuration (with supported processors and chipsets)	**Intel® Optane™ memory + SSHD** Get high performance and eliminate the SATA-interface read bottleneck

Disclaimers:
Intel® Optane™ memory requires specific hardware and software configuration. Visit www.intel.com/OptaneMemory for configuration requirements.
1) Source: Intel® Product Improvement Program Q4'16: 512,070 systems (483,403 desktop, 28,667 AIO) Windows 10*. Intel® Core™ processors
2) Power cycles include on, off, and sleep states
3) Source: Intel® Product Improvement Program Q4'16: 1,081,148 systems. Average 11 apps opened per day. Windows 10*. Intel® Core™ processors
4) Statistic represents an average across distinct applications. Actual number of applications opened per day may be higher. For instance, if Chrome is opened 5 times a day it is counted only once in the this calculation.
5) Source: Intel® Product Improvement Program Q4'16: 1,081,148 systems. Average 11 apps opened per day. Windows 10*. Intel® Core™ processors
6) Statistic represents an average across all applications across all systems. This number can vary depending on the application.
For instance, this number can be higher for an application like Chrome* and much lower for an application like iTunes* or Calculator, etc...
7) Source: Intel® Product Improvement Program Q1'17: 35,187 systems, Desktop/Laptop/2 in 1 Windows 10*. Intel® Core™ processors
8) Source: Intel® Product Improvement Program Q1'17: 12,419 systems, Desktop/Laptop/2 in 1 Windows 10*. Intel® Core™ processors
9) Statistic represents an average across distinct applications. Actual number of applications opened per day may be higher. For instance, if Chrome* is opened 5 times a day it is counted only once in the this calculation.
10) Source: Intel® Product Improvement Program Q1'17: 12,419 systems, Desktop/Laptop/2 in 1 Windows 10*. Intel® Core™ processors
11) Statistic represents an average across all applications across all systems. This number can vary depending on the application. For instance, this number can be higher for an application like Chrome* and much lower for an application like iTunes* or Calculator, etc...

THE AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS ARE COMING!

How do you determine what are the best PC products in a year? You could simply look at scores, or draw names out of a hat, but we have other plans. On the **22 March, 2018**, PC & Tech Authority, PC PowerPlay, Hyper and Atomic will host the first annual Australian PC Awards, an event that will see you, the readers determine the best products on the market. Starting **February 7, 2018** you, the most well informed, passionate and influential tech readers in Australia will have a chance to vote for the best products on the market.

Here's how it will work. The editorial teams of the nextmedia Technology and Gaming department will curate a list of nominees from the products we reviewed over 2017 as well as some of the products we may have missed. Once the nominees for all categories have been finalised, the awards will be opened up online for you to vote on. The votes will be collected until **February 28, 2018**, and the winners announced at a fabulous gala evening on **March 22nd in Sydney** – and you could win a spot there to have a grand night with us and the industry!

THE CATEGORIES ARE AS FOLLOWS:

MOTHERBOARDS

- Best motherboard company
- Best premium motherboard

VIDEO CARDS

- Best GPU company (AMD vs Nvidia!)
- Best OEM budget card
- Best OEM performance card

CPU

- Best CPU company (Intel vs AMD!)
- Best value CPU
- Best performance CPU

STORAGE

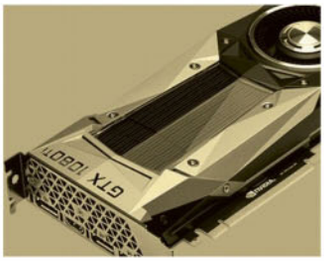
- Best HDD
- Best SATA SSD
- Best NVME SSD

NAS

- Best home NAS
- Best SOHO NAS

SYSTEMS

- Best laptop/convertible
- Best gaming laptop
- Best desktop PC builder



GAME

- Best PC game

COMPONENTS & PERIPHERALS

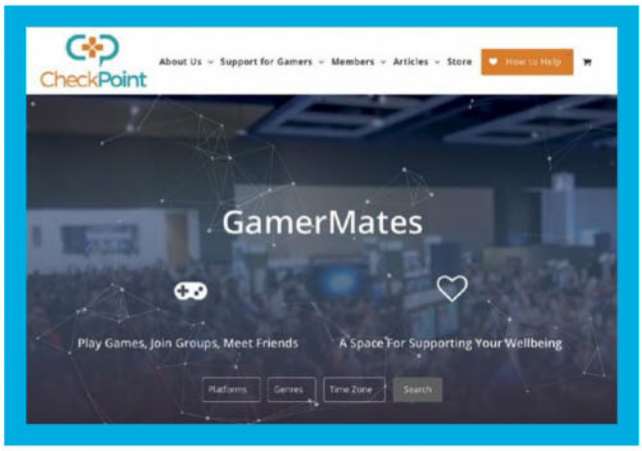
- Best memory company
- Best cooling product
- Best monitor
- Best keyboard
- Best mouse
- Best gaming headphones
- Best case
- Best router

RESELLER

- Best reseller (online)
- Best reseller (retail)

- **GOLD AWARD BEST COMPANY**

VOTE FOR YOUR CHANCE TO WIN AWESOME PRIZES!



CHECKPOINT ANNOUNCES NEW MENTAL-HEALTH-FOCUSED GAMING COMMUNITY

Keeping your thinking bone balanced

Mental health org CheckPoint has just announced a new gaming community with a focus on mental health - GamerMates.

Membership is completely free, and you can gain access to gamers from all over the world, mental health resources, online courses, and a community of people who understand where you're coming from. There are also giveaways and merch, badges and achievements to unlock.

And getting in on the ground floor helps CheckPoint, and GamerMates, grow, which helps more people find the mental health help they need.

You can learn more about the GamerMates community, and sign up at checkpoint.org.au/gamermates, or you can become a part of the wider CheckPoint organisation at checkpoint.org.au.

FREE TO PLAY SHOOTER WARFACE GETS NEW BATTLE ROYALE MODE

"What an original idea" says incredulous press

In the experimental PvP-mode Battle Royale, a player faces off against fifteen opponents, evading the rapidly increasing death zone and eliminating each other until one victor rises out of the fierce free-for-all combat. The mode combines Warface's largest PvP map to date with more than 70 different weapons and equipment for players to discover and adapt to the mayhem. Participants are dropped into the Mojave Desert, without any firearms initially. Scattered around the desert, players discover crates containing upgrades to their arsenal. Periodical airdrops with more valuable weapon caches will be sought after by all contestants.

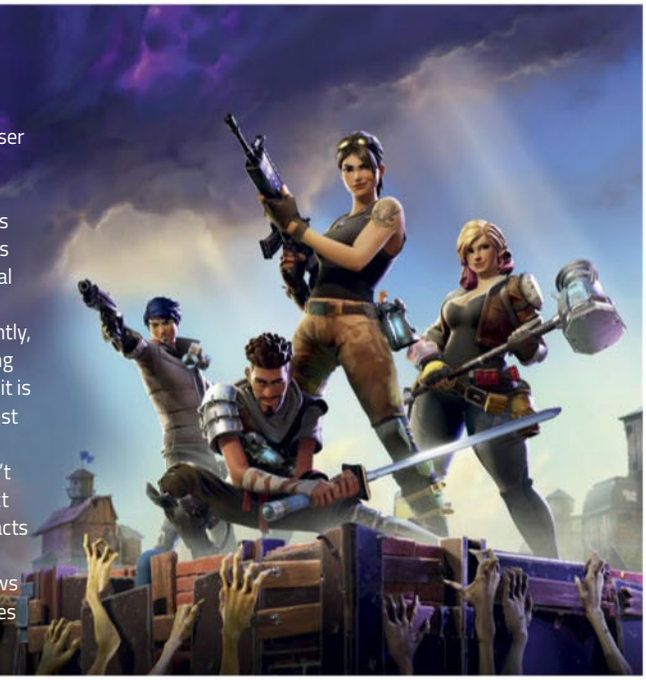
EPIC SUES KID

In all fairness, the kid sounds like a dick

In October, Epic Games, developer and publisher of the free-to-play building/battleground game, Fortnight started taking legal action against players who used or were affiliated with the cheating website, Addicted Cheats. The site offers aimbots for a subscription fee. In a statement given to Kotaku, a representative from Epic stated, "This particular lawsuit arose as a result of the defendant filing a DMCA counterclaim to a takedown notice on a YouTube video that exposed and promoted Fortnite Battle Royale cheats and exploits." Unfortunately for the developer, it appears that this particular cheater is only 14 years old.

In a letter to Epic, the kid's mother listed a number of grievances with the legal suit. She stated that the End User License Agreement (that Epic itself is using as justification for the suit) requires parental approval for minors but that she never gave it. This one is a little flimsy as the onus for approval or not is on her, not on the company providing the service. More importantly, the mother pointed out that releasing her son's full name publicly in the suit is in violation of Delaware's laws against the releasing of information relating to minors. The fact that children can't legally be sued also points to the fact that Epic may not have had all the facts when they started with the suit.

What's the moral here? Who knows - maybe don't cheat because it makes everyone look like a dickhead?



RESISTANCE **FULLY CUSTOMISABLE**

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Once again I gaze into my crystal ball and bring you my 100% accurate predictions for PC gaming in the year ahead! Satire!

January: The first major update for Star Wars Battlefront II arrives. It includes a time attack mode where players can mow down wave after wave of Porgs™, replete with graphic laser scorching effects and tormented Porg™ screams. Sales exceed all projections.

Bohemia Interactive revises its strategy for releasing weekly patches for ArmA 3 that completely break all mods – they're now twice-weekly. "It is not enough that modders suffer," explains Bohemia CEO Marek Španěl. "They must also be humiliated."

February: Noting that prisons in Red China force inmates to play MMOs and mine for gold, Clifford 'Cliffy B.' Bleszinski negotiates with North Korea to get political prisoners playing LawBreakers to help populate the servers. Kim Jong Un declines the offer, describing the very idea as "cruel and unusual punishment, and entirely at odds with Juche Philosophy."

March: Roberts Space Industries begins selling land in Star Citizen, just like in Second Life. Just like in Second Life, the space is rapidly occupied by Bronies and Furries, and used mostly for highly graphic erotic role-play.

Stocks in pharmaceutical companies soar due a misunderstanding resulting from the fact that the alien races in Star Citizen all sound like arthritis medications.

April: Noting how popular they became with gamers after adding Denuvo DRM protection on top of uPlay, Ubisoft moves to add a third layer of DRM: GuillemotPlay.

Ubisoft announces that as of July 1 their PC games will no longer load without a handwritten note from one of the five brothers who founded the company.

JAMES COTTEE is not going to know what to do with himself if Star Citizen ever gets released.

Having pushed the loot box economy as far as it can go, Activision-Blizzard begins using game clients to 'mine' for crypto-currencies on a massive scale. They also create their own: Kotick Koin, emblazoned with the wealthy CEO's unsettling visage.

May: After winding down support on LawBreakers, Cliffy B. instructs his studio Boss Key to make a game about the one thing he's passionate about these days: using insider info and privileged investment access to make millions by funnelling venture capital into tech start-ups. Cliffy hires Rick & Morty co-creator Justin Roiland to perform the voice of the player's in-game stockbroker.

June: E3. Following the success of the NES Mini, the SNES Mini, and the Commodore 64 Mini, yet another retro console is announced: the Gizmondo Mini.

Anthony Burch returns to Gearbox to write Borderlands 3. When he reveals that the villain is fan-favourite character Tiny Tina, disgruntled fans pursue him with pitchforks.

August: Flat Earth Games in association with 505 Games releases Objects in Space, a 2D space combat game, to some acclaim.

At GamesCom 2018 Chris Roberts announces a limited-time sale on a new type of Star Citizen ship: the "UK Taxpayer," a colossal workhorse that can weather any indignity, capable of building entire planets. Prices begin at US$10,000 for the most basic package; the vessel sells out within hours. Subsequent forensic analysis of the promotional .jpg image reveals it to be a heavily photo-shopped edit of the Valley Forge from Silent Running.

September: Jack Dorsey moves to monetise Twitter more effectively by introducing loot crates. Costing $4.99, each crate has a 5% chance of containing a special single-use button that lets you actually edit a tweet. Twitter's market capitalisation increases by 400% overnight.

A wave of dating sims aimed at cashing in on the success of Dream Daddy belatedly hits the market. One such game, Dream Democrat, is set in a high school populated by thinly-veiled parodies of Democrat primary contenders for the 2020 election, including Joe Biden, Chelsea Clinton, and Mark Zuckerberg. Critics describe Dream Democrat as 'insulting.'

October: At Citizen Con, Chris Roberts reveals to stunned on-lookers a trailer incorporating visual tropes from the hottest sci-fi movies of the year.

Inspired by the success of such premium protein drinks as Soylent and Muscle Milk, Roberts then proceeds to launch his own brand of meal-replacement shake: Whale Milk.

"Before you set sail, milk a whale!"

November: The organisers of Desert Bus For Hope launch a spin-off event where celebrity volunteers raise money for charity by playing through the '90s hentai games that the CIA found on Osama Bin Laden's hard drive.

Citing low player numbers, Gearbox adds bots to its new 'One Vs. One' online shooter.

December: Roberts Space Industries hits a new landmark, attaining more shell companies than full-time staff.

Former ABC TV presenter Steven 'Bajo' O'Donnell reaches 10,000 subscribers on Twitch, and celebrates by attempting to consume his own body weight in KFC live on stream. He loses half his subscribers in the process. PC

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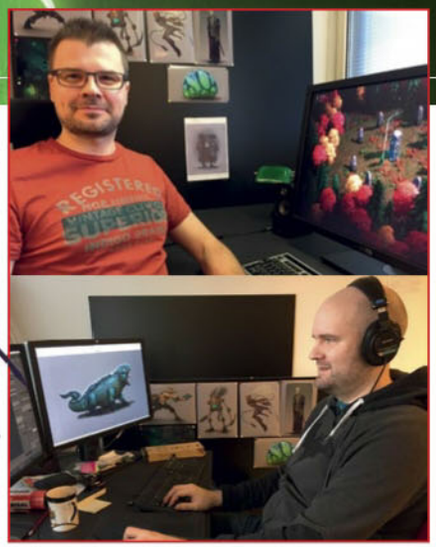


WHO PETRI HÄKKINEN, JUHO SALILA
WHERE CTRL ALT NINJA LTD.
WHY DRUIDSTONE

The creators of Legend of Grimrock 1 & 2 are embarking on a radical new direction for their new game. We talk to **PETRI HÄKKINEN** and **JUHO SALILA** about how Druidstone will harken back to the glory days of top-down tactical combat...

The two Legend of Grimrock games were huge sellers, and revitalised the first-person dungeon-crawling genre. So when we learned that the indie devs responsible were taking a very different direction with their next game, we had to know why.

Petri Häkkinen, responsible for game design and programming at Ctrl Alt Ninja, told us that the team simply needed a change of pace. "I guess we could have made a third game but making it right after working so long and so intensively on the previous games it wouldn't have been a labour of love any more. We felt we would have been repeating the same recipe all over again. That said, it's not impossible that we'll revisit the Grimrock universe in some form at some point.

"We are huge fans of tactical turn-based games and we also play tabletop RPGs and board games such as Descent: Journeys in the Dark, so making this kind of game was a natural choice. Personally for me Druidstone is a game I have been wanting to make for a long time. SSI's Pool of Radiance, the original [D&D] Gold Box game and one of our inspirations, left a big mark on me when I was younger. Druidstone combines the best parts of the board games and those old-school CRPGs we still love to play even today. I'm talking about the grid and tactical combat using a solid rules system and of course the wonder of exploring an unknown, fantastical world."

Art lead Juho Salila concurred, stating that their goal was to try something new but stay with the fantasy genre they love. "One of the biggest new things for us is the strong emphasis on story. With the Grimrock games, we had the story in the background, but this time we're bringing it forth. So far it's been really fun, but also challenging.

"Telling a story in a dungeon crawler was difficult because you cannot really see the main characters, other than the small portraits in the corner of the screen. With a top-down perspective it's much more feasible and with Druidstone we are really bringing the characters to life, each with personal back-stories and quirky personalities."

But why druids? Juho informed us that they chose a druid as the lead character because druids emanate a certain aura of mysticism. "We think they are a versatile character type that is not limited into doing just one thing and they aren't the most common character class you see in games. Druids in Druidstone are definitely inspired by Gaelic tradition, but we didn't want to limit ourselves to the traditional or stereotypical fantasy druids, so we are definitely making some creative decisions."

> being born in Finland we want to pass on this awe and wonder of the natural world to our players

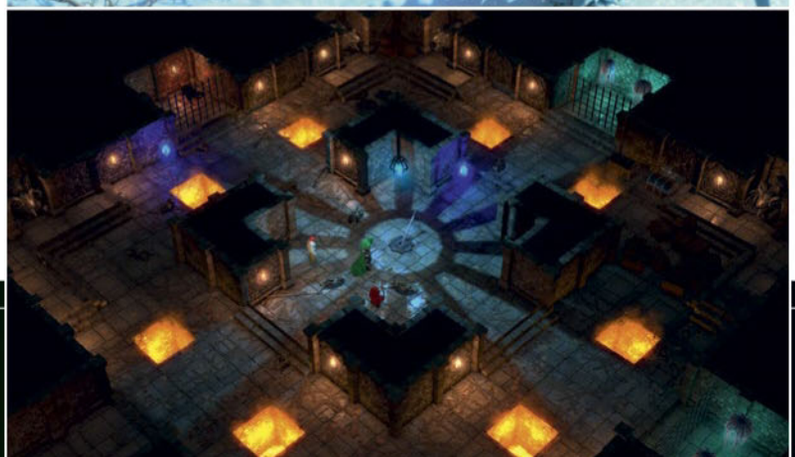
Petri also pointed out that the dev team are all Finns – nature plays a big part in their lives. "Even if you live in a city in Finland, you can get to the middle of a forest in just half an hour. The winters are snowy and so intense that people are literally being killed by cold every year. The Finnish forests are among the few rare places on earth where you can actually experience total silence and the wonderful feeling of being part of something greater. I think even if they don't realise it themselves, most Finns have a special connection with nature and the Finnish mythology and Kalevala are full of interesting characters and tales. There are relatively few games out there that capture the feeling of this natural world.

"We could have centred the story of Druidstone on Finnish mythology, but that would have been perhaps a little bit too much in our own comfort zone. So that's why we looked a little further and found the druids, Stonehenge, and all the interesting lore which happen to share thematically much with Nordic ways. After all, we have tales of the witches and shamans of Lapland which are not that far removed from druids… I think us being born in Finland are privileged to be part of this beautiful country and we want to pass on this awe and wonder of the natural world to our players."

Juho told us that they're leaning towards a high fantasy setting with Druidstone, but without the traditional well-used elves and orcs. "We consciously try to stay away from them and create our own interesting mix of characters, creatures, monsters, and magic. The game world isn't limited to the Menhir Forest, the story also takes the player to cold snowy mountains and, for example, to a frozen monastery that holds a terrible past, and other wonderful places. Woven into the story, we also have a theme of Seeds, or other planes of existence – a multiverse that plays a special part in the story."

As for the game design, Juho said that this time they're not inspired by a direct paragon, as they were with Grimrock. "There are a couple of games which we are very fond of and hope to capture their atmosphere such as Baldur's Gate and the Final Fantasy games, especially those on the original PlayStation. Yes, they're quite different from each other, but we have taken the spirit of those games and merged them into Druidstone."

Petri pointed out SSI's Gold Box games as another strong influence. "We have also enjoyed XCOM and its later incarnations very much. Many of the CRPGs of yore suffered from insensible rulesets (looking at you AD&D!) and poor user-interfaces, so we are certainly going to improve on them. Looking at newer games it has been



somewhat disappointing to me how many of them have dropped the grid and instead rely on free 3D movement. We believe that tactical combat works just so much better on a grid where you can position your heroes exactly and easily determine ranges, blocked squares, and area of effects at a glance."

The level design in Druidstone was originally roguelike in nature, but Juho told us how this concept evolved at they iterated. "As the game started take its shape and the story we wanted to tell was becoming clear, it made the procedural level generation more unfitting, so we've toned down the procedurality and pretty much dropped the roguelike side of the game. At the moment we have a system that randomises and joins premade areas. We'll have to see how much authored and randomised content there'll be in the end. We'll keep adjusting the balance according to what makes the game most fun to play."

Next Juho touched upon the flexible party-based RPG system. "Even though Leonhard the main character may start as a more combat-oriented character, he may learn to cast spells as the game progresses, though he may not be as powerful as a mage, but the possibility will be there. Of course Leonhard will not be travelling alone. He will be accompanied by other party members, who have unique skill sets. Currently we have four playable characters in the game: a druid, a dryad, a mage, and a wolf, each with different personalities and abilities. The druid and wolf are focused on combat, the mage is a more traditional spellcaster and the dryad is a healing/supporting character, though she packs quite a punch."

At this point Petri wanted to make clear that the RPG mechanics are still a work in progress. "At the moment we have a system that separates experience points (XP) and ability points (AP). Gaining XP allows you to go up in levels which will increase your health and unlock new abilities. We wanted to limit the effect of grinding, so advancing in levels will not gain you ability points. Instead APs are awarded when you progress in the game, and they can be used to buy new active and passive abilities and spells for your characters depending on their character class."

Juho and Petri went to great pains to stress how thankful they are for all the support they've received from Legend of Grimrock fans over the years. Yet the recent glut of indie titles has not escaped their attention, and Juho admitted this trend is worrying. "It doesn't help any more that you have a really great game when people can't find the game. As games are nowadays technically pretty easy to make and publish, the sheer volume of mediocre or downright joke games drowns out the good ones. Honestly, we can't say at the moment how to battle that problem."

Petri noted that while making and publishing games is easier than ever, this is part of a natural progression as platforms get older. "As a new platform appears, for example when Steam or iPhone launched, there is an initial gold rush period when new titles fill the void. Because of their gate keepers, consoles seem to be the only platforms which are not overwhelmingly crowded at the moment. I think the big question is, what will be the next new platform? Perhaps AR could be it, but then again it could be a little bit too gimmicky to have mass appeal. As for the secret of survival? I simply don't know. That's why I'm making every game as if it's my last."

For more details, visit *druidstone-game.com*.

JAMES COTTEE PC

A Marvelous Mismatch

When two supposedly different games seem eerily similar.

I've been reflecting on my two big "comfort" games, recently. They're both deeply engaging, self-directed and satisfy my inner micromanager. Really, when I need to disappear into a whorl of escapist perfectionism, I could go to one or the other. The interesting thing is that one allows for near infinite achievement, while the other tests, and inevitably breaks, my carefully constructed world.

Of course, I'm talking about The Sims 4 and RimWorld. No, don't turn the page, let me explain. They're totally the same game, as I see it, with only two significant differences; RimWorld is inherently dangerous and its colonists have mandatory, autonomous qualities. Otherwise, the formula is the same; make aesthetic and logistic choices in support of your characters' needs and your projected goals. Everything from skill development to emergent drama is comparable, and the two experiences certainly scratch the same itches. (For me, anyway.)

When I was in San Francisco previewing The Sims 4, a designer told me they wanted to make failure less relevant, so that players would prioritise positive goals. You can give your character the vegetarian trait, for example, then cook them nothing but meat, but why? The Sick and Sad debuff moodlets just make everything pointlessly difficult. RimWorld may not currently allow for an optimal plant-based diet, but it does provide debuffs for eating human meat, unless characters are psychopaths or cannibals. See? The same.

In fact, keeping everyone feeling great, rather than bad, is the only sensible way to play these games. If your character in The Sims 4 isn't either Very Happy or Very Inspired, learning the violin takes forever and their cooking sucks. If your character in RimWorld is Stressed, there's an excellent chance they'll start shooting everyone. Characters in either game can have inherently evil traits, but this simply influences whether they become Happy or Stressed by actions like pranking or wearing clothing made from a human corpse.

You can certainly allow for autonomous actions in The Sims 4, and expect lots of chess playing, not much achievement. Rarely doing this myself, I did a quick bit of research and found the following statement, "I think the autonomous woohoo was toned down in a patch." Good to know. In RimWorld, you can't even control who your character makes advances towards, including whether they're straight, gay, bisexual or already taken. I had one guy rebuffed so many times, he suffered a mental breakdown.

> "my Sims all reach the tops of their careers; my colonists die horribly"

Of course, using firearms or pointy weapons against an enemy, or friend, can lead to realistic injury and, sometimes, lasting impairment. In RimWorld, this is hard to avoid on modes where you're subject to raids, animal attacks and other harsh negative factors, like psychic drones. As an example, blind colonists will still be able to attempt some tasks, but at a much slower rate. Despite The Sims 4 having lots of options for gender and sexual orientation, disability isn't something that's ever been realistically portrayed, minor mods aside.

Perhaps RimWorld doesn't have children, as yet, because it would be impossible to protect them from violence. It's bad enough when a puppy gets eaten by a fox. In The Sims 4, as soon as you stop feeding your children, possibly because you're just trying to finish their damn potty training, they get whisked away to a happier home. As the player, this is actually an extremely harsh punishment, because you've invested so much time into making them stack blocks. In both The Sims 4 and RimWorld, veteran characters are extremely valuable.

What's my point? I don't know. I got so busy comparing my two comfort games that I forgot. Having just written up the indies from PAX, considering how dark themes are treated in games like Duped and Think of the Children, I'm wondering why I don't strongly prefer one or the other of the long term game states in The Sims 4 and Rimworld. My Sims all reach the tops of their careers and have lovely, relaxing hobbies into their retirement. My RimWorld colonists are missing most of their digits and die horribly.

Here is a quote from RimWorld developer, Tynan Sylvester: "RimWorld's depiction of humanity is not meant to represent an ideal society, or characters who should act as role models. It's not a Star Trek utopia. It's a depiction of a messy group of humans (not heroes) in a broken, backward society, in desperate circumstances." The Sims' aim is exactly opposite. Somehow, although the destinations of these two great peoples, Sims and space colonists, are so radically different, their journeys feel incredibly similar. Perhaps games are all about mechanics, and not story, after all. PC

MEGHANN O'NEILL, could totally mod a parka made from human leather into The Sims 4. Why does that feel so amazingly evil when it's something her RimWorld colonists wear to survive?

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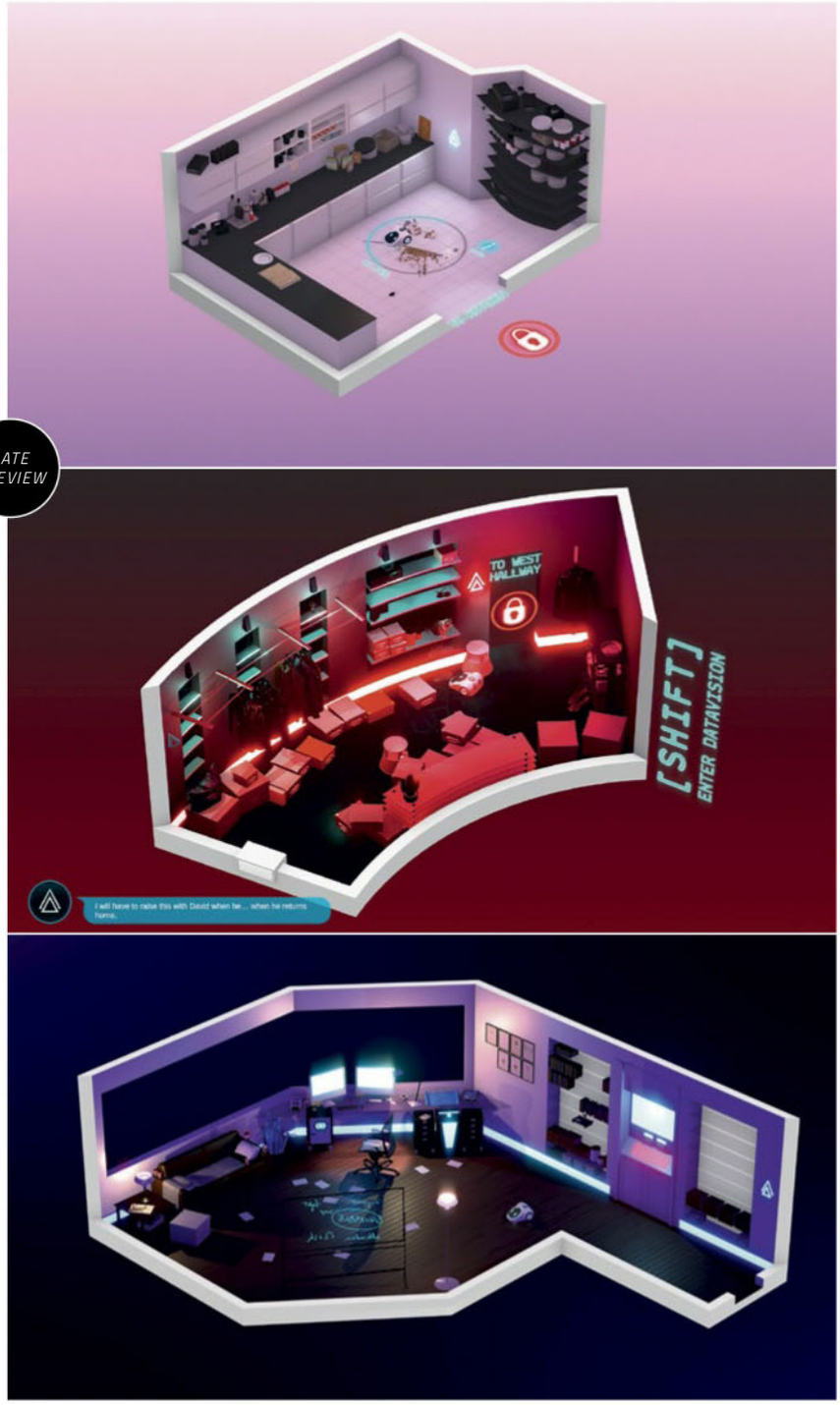
A Collection Aside

Can you believe **MEGHANN O'NEILL** has attended five PAXs Australia? Here is this year's proof: 13 indies from the 2017 collection, including games/demos you can play now, many at accessible prices. This year was notable for its outstanding student projects and text-based games. Although we've extended the indie section this month, page space remains limited, so we've de-prioritised some of the exceptional games that will be releasing soon, hoping to bring you full reviews over the next few issues.

RUMU

DEVELOPER ROBOT HOUSE • **PRICE** TBA
rumugame.com

LATE PREVIEW



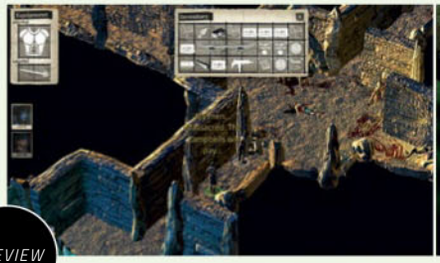
Being a mostly "work from home mum", attending PAX each year requires asking someone else to manage the household for a few days. This year, Ken had organised to go kayaking with mates over the same weekend and joked that we needed some kind of "smart house" to feed the kids and put them to bed. Rumu is a timely reminder that human babysitters, like grandparents, are still a good option. This narrative adventure/puzzle game may initially appear cute, but it's soon clear that something has gone horribly wrong. Why am I cleaning so much "sauce?" Where are the house's occupants?

"Sentient robot vacuum cleaner as protagonist," isn't something I ever expected to type in a preview, yet here we are. Another main character is the house's AI who, rather ominously, wants to discuss an overriding need to protect and love. Rumu's appeal relies on this intersection of surprising characters and relatable story. I may not be a robot, but I can respond to ethical dilemmas that riff on universal themes. It's like reading a classic science fiction short story, by a writer like Brian Aldiss, and being asked "what if" with the suggestion of agency over narrative outcomes. I love it.

Mechanically, the demo requires paying attention to subtle details and learning to route power for problem solving. Although I quickly cracked the last puzzle, I had the odd sense that I could also set fire to the lounge room, if I could just figure out a final step. Could I? Would I? I'm interested to learn more. Driving Rumu around can be mildly frustrating, especially when you're trying to just clean up the last 2% of "sauce," but this is surely very faithful to the robot vacuum cleaning experience. I think, if you'll pardon the pun, we can expect this game to be a very polished experience (*You're fired - Ed.*).

ODD GODS

DEVELOPER INN BETWEEN WORLDS • **PRICE** TBA
www.inn-between-worlds.com



PREVIEW

Prior to PAX Australia each year, I know I'm going to feature one outstanding indie. What will it be? Probably, a complete surprise, which is exciting. As was the case with Forts and Ticket to Earth, it's always a bit like "love at first sight." Of course, I'll keep an open mind and see everything. There's totally room in my seven pages for a range of delightful games that I also truly adore. But this year, when I walked past the RPG with the turn-based combat, similar to Shadowrun Returns, and saw a skateboard in its inventory, I knew Odd Gods was getting a full page.

Gil Maclean, as project lead, has impressive experience which spans writing for the acclaimed Ultima V Lazarus mod and contributing to several Electronic Arts titles, including an unannounced Dragon Age project. He wants to tell a story of the 1990s, set as a '90s RPG, and hopes the game will provide more than "simple nostalgia." He says, "It's a decade of conflicting extremes. As well as cynical geopolitics and obscene commercialisation/consumerism, you have flourishing subcultures, counterculture and music genres spawning on a scale that surprised the world."

The demo allows you to choose your class, or subculture, and be a skater or goth. This is pretty great, given I was never cool enough to be either, as a teenager. You awaken, locked in someone's leaky bedroom, littered with '90s artifacts, and quickly escape into a network of creepy tunnels. As you run past corpses, ritualistic markings and out into a floating fort, you meet the first companion. Strangely, he doesn't understand what "OK" means and, later, in another unexpected location, you come to understand why. It's clever how the storytelling relies heavily on environmental clues, too.

I also noticed that the skater and goth speak/think differently to each other. As to the wider implications for class, Maclean says, "Just like in the 1990s, subcultures are in constant low-level conflict which can divide friends and enemies." In combat, characters can move, kick, wait and attack in a few ways, based on equipped weapons. You have to anticipate what your opponent will do and then plan for a simultaneous turn. Maclean says, "Accessing your inventory during combat is risky, but holsters allow you to pack extra weapons. So, you can shoulder a long-arm rifle while equipping a sword and shield, and stash a dirk in your boot."

He continues, "Every action has weight and a tactical approach can overcome almost any situation, if you've read the enemy correctly. There's no random number generation or percentage chance to hit, no level-scaling, no bullet sponges, and every encounter is handcrafted. Each turn takes three ticks of time and each action takes a number of ticks to perform. Firing a flintlock pistol takes two ticks, one to aim, and another to fire. That means a nimble or cautious opponent can survive that encounter, because they can throw themselves to the ground or dodge."

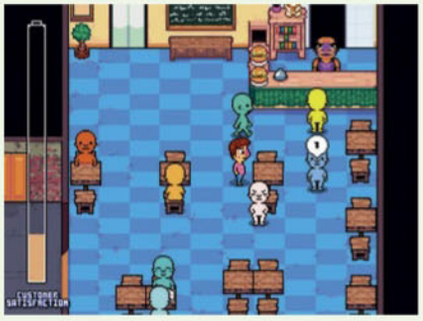
I don't know about you, but I'm convinced. So, grab your black lipstick or high top shoes and join me in being excited in advance for detailed systems and retro settings, even if it's just to try to decipher the runes at the bottom of the mock sleeve on the website and laugh at box quotes like, "Went to a demon house party, woke up in another dimension." Maclean says, "We need to dissect a decade. It's challenging to do authentically but extremely fun to work on. We take our '90s roots very seriously." I strongly suspect I'm going to love this one all the way to its closing credits.

KNUCKLE SANDWICH

DEVELOPER ANDREW BROPHY • **PRICE** TBA
knucklesandwich.biz

PREVIEW

I'm starting to really appreciate games with a tongue-in-cheek approach to genre conventions. Designers are using humour to connect with, and subvert, nostalgic expectation and, as an oldie, this endears me to the experience. For example, if there's a difficult battle ahead, a classic game may not have prompted me to save. Modern-me doesn't have time to replay large swathes of content and expects regular checkpoints. What did Knuckle Sandwich do? The



diner's phone rang and it was the bus driver saying, "You know I don't usually do this, but I thought you might want to save now."

The kids and I laughed. For them, it was just absurd. For me, this humour has many layers, from the awkwardness of someone calling for a spurious reason, to enjoying that the designer gave me what I wanted in a surprising way. Similarly, the action is much faster paced than in a classic RPG. The opening is about finding and keeping various jobs, characterised by a range of colourful mini-games. Combat involves choosing between a couple of kinaesthetic tasks, like hitting a moving target or wiggling the left stick. You can also choose the foetal position which is appropriately disturbing.

The demo ends by revealing why this game is called Knuckle Sandwich which absolutely left me wanting to play more. Again, this was a surprising twist and I like the promise of a game which will refuse to conform to my expectations. Like how anyone, villain or hero, can die in Game of Thrones. It's exciting to not know where this journey will go, while trusting that my time and experience will be respected. At one point, I was being asked questions and my character was just scribbling nonsense in response. My kids asked why I was laughing. "Because my answers don't matter," I said. They need to play more RPGs.

THINK OF THE CHILDREN

DEVELOPER JAMMED UP STUDIOS • **PRICE** $10
thinkofthechildrengame.com

content warning: accidental child death and child abuse

Think of the Children's very first level name put me all the way on edge. "Are we at the tutorial yet?" No. Kids. There's. A. Loading. Screen. The very second level saw two of my children drown, one get run over, another taken by child protective services and I have no idea what happened to the rest. I played it again and was horrified to realise that, while I'd been at the barbecue, one child had eaten poisoned berries and another was staring at their corpse. Then they were all dead again. I knew what I needed. A loving partner, playing co-op. "OK," said Ken, "I'll flip burgers and you do everything else."

We laughed because he's actually a very engaged parent and always happy to muck in with housework. Unexpectedly, however, we failed another six or so times, with the game rating who was the better parent; always me. As another child drowned in the pool, I wondered if he was remembering the time he nearly let Nick wander off the end of a pier. I was. (OK, it wasn't that bad. I'm a bit of a nervous mum, generally.) Luckily, we recruited our younger, real life child to be actually quite a competent third dad and our unconventional family survived a barbecue at the park with only one child dying horribly.

Before we started saving our children from sharks at the "Are we at the Beach yet?" level, we got a cutscene which reveals we were actually "playing" the evidence in a trial against us. I do like absurd humour, and Think of the Children perfectly represents the stressed out hysteria that is parenting, but people do actually lose their children in pools and on busy roads. I wonder if the kids could simply have been naughty and destructive instead, though this would have been a different game. I left both having enjoyed the experience and feeling uncomfortable. Play if you will enjoy it, avoid it if you won't.

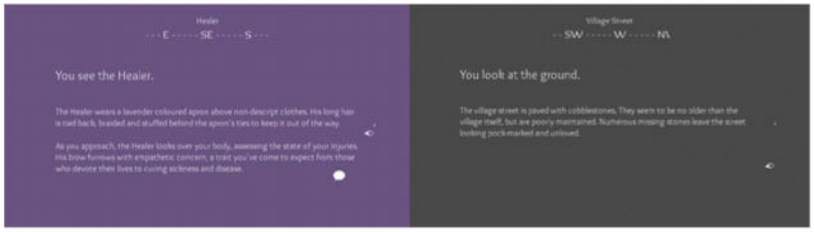
WINTER'S WAKE

DEVELOPER CHEESENESS • **PRICE** TBA
winterswake.com

PREVIEW

Each year, PAX Australia has a slightly different feel to it, overall. It might be an influx of party games and players are laughing, or roguelikes and players are cursing. This year, the text-based genres stepped up, engaging passersby with clever hooks and generating cheerful buzz. The banner for Winter's Wake began, "You see a stand for a game. The signage is unusual in a way that catches your eye." Next, the description touched on setting and mechanics, then, "You linger a moment and consider approaching." If you're a fan of text adventures, you know what to do next. If not, you already stopped reading.

The similarly meta website links to a pre-release demo and some exceptional development videos. As well as a tight narrative and sound that includes heroic, orchestral pieces, you explore this world by turning, raising and lowering your head with arrow keys and, maybe eventually, a VR headset. If you're facing east, you may be reading the description for a gate. Look up and you may see a belltower, down and a useful item on the ground may be found. The opening of the demo expertly teaches the requisite curiosity. And if you get stuck? "You see a walkthrough for a demo of an exciting game."



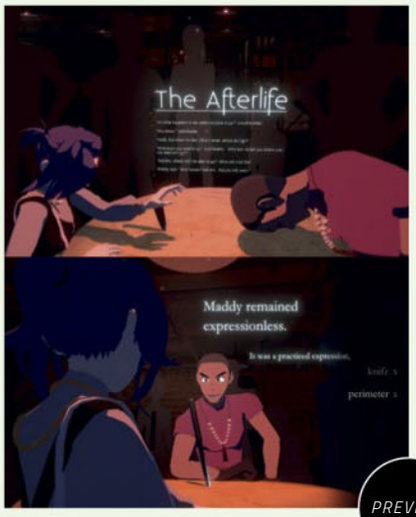
EATVOLVE

DEVELOPER PAPADAR • **PRICE** CURRENTLY $1
papadar.itch.io/eatvolve

PREVIEW

No-one wants to play a platformer as a worm. You're slow and can't do anything. And yet, this is how Eatvolve begins. So, how do you want to navigate your procedurally generated pixel art? With the legs of a frog, the sticky feet of a gecko or the floaty gracefulness of a sugar glider? If you eat one butterfly, you can flap your wings once. But, if you're on a butterfly eating spree, you'll be able to flap four times, flitting up to previously unreachable platforms. Experimenting with how to build your strange, hybrid creature is as fun as playing them to the top of the level.

Obviously, this is highly replayable, especially because being suddenly eaten is frequent. Amazingly, I played several times in an upwards direction before I realised you can go downwards, too. Not only is there a distinct change in music, visibility decreases and you may start wanting to eat new creatures like glow worms, in the new context. Although more features and levels will be added, including boss fights and DNA that can be accessed in subsequent levels, purchasing this from itch.io now is a good option because it's one US dollar. If you missed PAX this year, here is another chance to join the fun.



PREVIEW

NECROBARISTA

DEVELOPER ROUTE 59 • **PRICE** TBA
www.necrobarista.com

With so many games to see at PAX, I do like a concise elevator pitch. "Last coffee on Earth," works pretty well for me. As a visual novel, Necrobarista opens in an uncharacteristically exciting manner. A man is gambling with two of his life's three remaining hours in a game of Five Finger Fillet and loses. The text glides closer, the perspective changes, characters are illuminated by a "naked, incandescent bulb," and the knife glints brightly, as it whips through their fingers. Who is Maddy? Why does she delight in winning his last hours? Why does everyone seem to know her?

Suddenly, the action freezes and you're allowed to look around the room, at objects and people. "Sarah, with a lust for danger," is one of the bystanders and you can infer some of why she is sitting in this room as you move close and read her story. After a time, you sit back on your milk crate and flickering lights foreshadow the arrival of a helmeted man called Ned who has come to collect a debt. Who is he? Why is he so notorious? Why does he expect to be remembered? For the first time, Maddy seems rattled. I have a more compelling question, though. Who am I? This is a visual novel with many hooks.

The Student Page

FIRSTBORN

DEVELOPER ELSTON STUDIOS • **PRICE** TBA
www.indiedb.com/games/firstborn

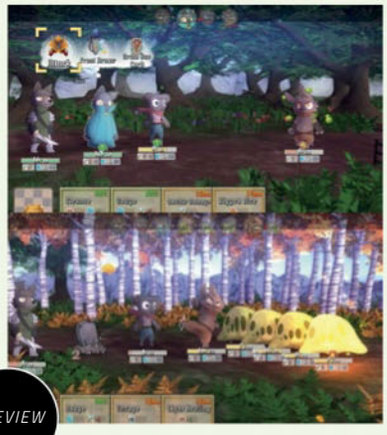
PREVIEW

The opening to Firstborn reminded me of a mobile game I play on the train, Enyo by Tiny Touch Tales. Both, you beat by killing opponents but through indirect violence, like bashing them into spikes or pulling them into lava. Firstborn quickly becomes a party-based game, however, where a small team of characters use supportive abilities to solve handcrafted levels. I particularly like how some are passive, like the way the Guardian's shield will block any frontal assault and protect those behind her. Also, that you can bait enemies into chasing you, through the path of an archer who is pausing to aim.

As a single-player, turn-based experience, you can issue commands to your party in any order, and make use of a handy "undo move" button, if you haven't taken damage. Enemies may herald their next attack and observation is required, while learning what they can do and how far they can travel. My favourite battle involved a fearsome dragon who was entirely beatable on my first attempt, but only because I was applying what I'd learned, while cautiously approaching new, additional items and mechanics. Firstborn has a demo on Indie DB. It's a polished, strategic experience that I'd highly recommend.

KOMOREBI

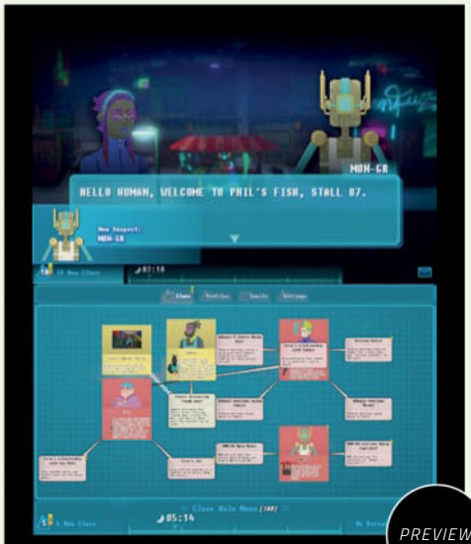
DEVELOPER FINEST OWL PRODUCTIONS • **PRICE** TBA
finestowlproductions.tumblr.com



PREVIEW

As mentioned above, I do try to stay aware of what students are making because I'm interested, as a tertiary lecturer. Over the last few years, Sydney's AIE has had an influx of new students and I've stopped expecting to see mostly shooters and stealth games. Teams are exploring other genres, and it's nice to see people working within those which are tougher to balance, like strategy. Komorebi experiments with a range of statistics and abilities in turn-based combat. I found a few of the levels in the demo quite difficult to beat, even after a few attempts. I like that a lot.

Your team of three are able to attack and undertake other actions, based on their class. Additionally, the group draws cards from a deck which can be activated when you have gems, collected after killing an enemy. Abilities allow for extra cards and redraws, and it's nice that healing is card-based, meaning you don't waste an attack to heal. Each foe has special characteristics, like how slimes divide if they're not dealt with quickly, and systems are detailed, providing lots of options for play. As with Lacuna, I'd like to see more narrative development, but I'm very interested to see this at a finished stage.



PREVIEW

LACUNA

DEVELOPER FOURTH EYE • **PRICE** TBA
www.facebook.com/TeamFourthEye

In adventure games, conversations can stall if you haven't yet learned relevant information. Also, it can be a convoluted process to remember who to speak to and where new data fits into a dialogue tree. Lacuna expertly transforms this experience by way of innovative, context specific systems, while you're investigating the future death of a friend. An interactive crime board, with descriptive cards for people, words and clues, allow for connections to be made and any aspect to be raised in conversation. Someone may respond, "I don't know," if you're investigating badly, but you're always allowed to ask.

I'm interested to see how the story can be developed to more comprehensively explore the potential of, and opportunities afforded by, this unique structure. Given I googled "lacuna" and found an additional secret slotting into place, I'm hopeful. Certainly, the game's fluorescent, cyberpunk, pixel art was among PAX's best eye candy, too. And, I first saw Lacuna when I was visiting AIE and was able to introduce the team to one of my composition students, who is subsequently working on the project, so I do have that additional connection. For adventure fans, this is one to watch.

GENESIS NOIR

DEVELOPER FERAL CAT DEN • **PRICE** TBA
genesisnoirgame.com

EARLY PREVIEW

It's rare I'll play a game/demo and have no idea how to start explaining it. I mean, there was a nude photo above my bed and a giant phone that made my house disintegrate when I dialled the number written on some trash. Then I fell for a long time, viciously smashed a door and I think the gal I love might have gotten shot by a gigantic gun. I planted some seeds, created the creepiest of moons from a psychedelic sunflower and, really, thought it was a great experience. It wasn't until I googled Genesis Noir that I learned the game is set before, during and after the Big Bang. That's pretty cool.

I didn't finish the demo. It's very early in development, so it crashed a bit. But I did play the opening three times and was surprised to notice additional narrative moments that had initially gone over my head. The story is crammed full of visual information that is more easily interpreted when you've started understanding the context. The artwork, from an elongated protagonist to a beautiful tree growing on a kind of dynamic, cosmic ledge, is unusual and distinctive. The sound design, combining jazz with electronica, reminds me of that British children's show that traumatised me in the '80s, Chocky.

I'm not sure I'd call Genesis Noir a point and click adventure. It's more like the Samorost games, where you click everything and see what happens, then stumble on solutions. Or like Plug and Play, with less, but probably not zero, sexual innuendo. Think of it as an animated short film that you can explore, as well as watch. It's interesting to see developers experimenting with interactivity and stories that don't have to eschew detail just because they're told without words. I may not have understood what was happening in the demo, but I loved it, and I'm sure everything will become clear, as the universe expands.

DUPED

DEVELOPER NO MOSS STUDIOS • **PRICE** $5
xorglord.com/projects/duped

RELEASED

While being introduced to Duped at PAX, I was posed a question; "If you replace the handle on an axe, is it still the same axe?" I mean, yes, probably. "But then what if you replace the blade?" This game is deep, man. (*Maybe you should axe Theseus this question? - Ed.*) You begin by driving an unwieldy square through a snowy landscape and then there's a platform you can't reach, but another square can propel you there. But is it "another square" given you're suddenly controlling it with the same inputs as the original square, like in Kalimba by Press Play? As you exit the level, the camera pans to the aspect of yourself that you left behind and the lights dim. Its eyes close.

After several levels of primarily being the pink square, you then have to leave it behind and become the green square. Next, you are a bunch of squares. Are you inclined to remain the same colour, even if the level is more difficult to solve? Or can you be a rainbow? Thoughtful level design supports the philosophical nature of the experience, including as things get more complicated. Soon you're hastily creating duplicates to replace the you who is falling to their death. It's surprisingly sad and prompted me to reflect on all of the protagonists I've discarded, and left in taverns, over the years.

In this feature, I wanted to include at least some games that are available now, so that you can consider playing along with PAX's collection at home. Duped was released in September and has a distinctive demo where the platforms tell the story of Theseus' mast, a thought experiment about structure and replacement. It's cool to realise that you're literally jumping on an allegory that underpins every aspect of game design. As a platformer, it can be unwieldy at times, mostly because squares just are, but if you're ready to be challenged about identity and death, it's absolutely worth a play. PC

EARTHLIGHT

DEVELOPER OPAQUE SPACE • **PRICE** TBA
www.earthlightvr.com

PREVIEW

Prior to PAX, I was reconciled to the idea that the closest I'd ever get to space would be another video of Commander Chris Hadfield brushing his teeth in zero gravity. (My seven year old has discovered YouTube.) Then, I played Earthlight. At 2017's Australian Game Developer Awards, Earthlight was awarded Game of the Year for a compelling use of new technology. Opaque Space was also awarded Studio of the Year for pushing the boundaries of what games can achieve. Incredibly, the team is working on Boeing's Starliner astronaut/pilot training and collaborating with NASA in the creation of VR content.

And so, aboard the virtual ISS, I took a moment to rifle through cabinets and squirt bubbles of liquid around. It was fun. Leaving the airlock to undertake a maintenance mission, however, was something else. I was full of questions.

Is this to scale? What is that island? Are those brightly lit areas inhabited? Why is the ocean so blue? As I eventually removed the headset and a designer asked me if I were OK, I experienced a distinct moment of not wanting to return to reality. This unique vantage point had prompted me to consider a wider context for our beautiful planet, beyond my usually mundane, suburban existence.

I haven't played a lot of VR games, except at conventions, but the barrier to entry seems less prohibitive if it can provide truly inspiring experiences, like Earthlight's story of an astronaut's journey. The platform's typical offerings, including satire and mini-games, are great. But which grander settings lend themselves to this inherent immersiveness? Recently, I met a woman who is filming for VR inside a refugee camp and another whose project allows you to conduct the Australian Chamber Orchestra. This was my fifth PAX Australia and, each year, the games on show reach new heights of excellence. Earthlight was, at least virtually, out of this world. PC

> "this vantage point had prompted me to consider a wider context for our beautiful planet"

Huge Power, Tiny Package

CHRONOS
BY ORIGIN PC

"Origin's Chronos Gaming PC, without a doubt, tops our charts in regards to performance and takes the crown even at half the size as the other contenders."

Steven Bassiri, TweakTown Editor

Configure Yours Online today - originpc.com.au

TEAM ORIGIN PC

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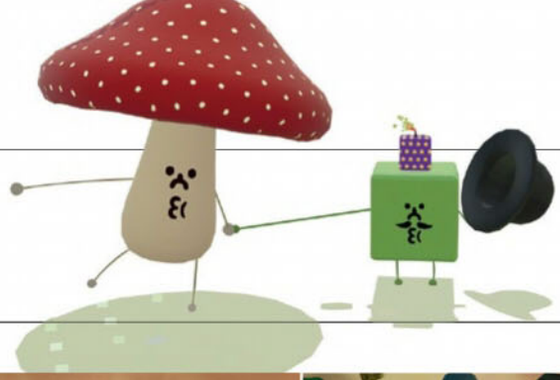
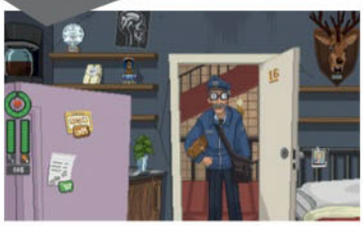
VR READY

10 to Watch





Do Not Feed the Monkeys

1

DEVELOPER FICTIORAMA STUDIOS
PUBLISHER BADLAND GAMES
DUE 2018
www.fictiorama.com/en/inicio

▼ Do you like spying on people? Do you feel as though your neighbours are a lesser form of life? If so, then Do Not Feed the Monkeys could be for you. You've just been accepted by The Primate Observation Club, meaning you now have the ability to invade the privacy of strangers and witness their most private moments. Spy on anyone, but make no contact with specimens. Do Not Feed the Monkeys. Pixelated weirdness with consequences is assured.

Krotruvink

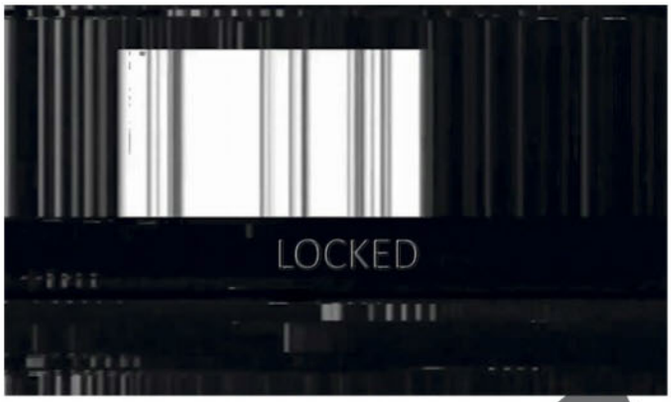
2

DEVELOPER VALDRAM
PUBLISHER VALDRAM
DUE 2018
www.valdram.com/krotruvink

▲ We won't even try to describe Krotruvink, so instead here is the game blurb:

"Have you ever been on the verge of proportionality? This story is about a single person who was unsure of the nature of things and the physical integrity of things around him. Everyday this man went to his job and dreamed of a time in which, it seems, he didn't exist. Days dashed forward. But then one day after our protagonist took the bus to work, he got off on... a ship."

This is a single player, surreal adventure/puzzle/story game made by a single oddball.

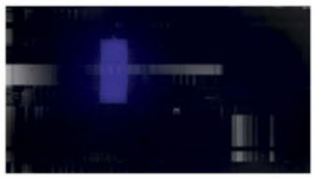


3

Break the Game

DEVELOPER INSANITY GAMES • **PUBLISHER** INSANITY GAMES • **DUE** NOT YET
twitter.com/insanity_games

A sequel to the wonderful, funny and weird free meta-platformer Escape the Game sees Kevin, the square-with-eyes protagonist of the original game, stuck in another game. He has been trapped within for 8259 days and he needs help from the outside to break the game and escape. Are you up to the task? Can you put up with the characters in the game and Kevin critiquing your choices? Are you sick of all these rhetorical questions? Are they really rhetorical?



4

Credence Filter

DEVELOPER CHARLIE CARLO • **PUBLISHER** CHARLIE CARLO • **DUE** BEFORE THE SECOND APOCALYPSE
twitter.com/credencefilter

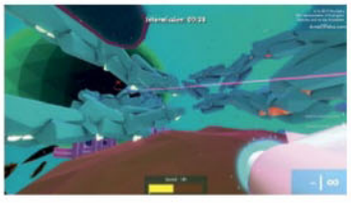
In 2006 a very strange individual, Frank Sudol, made an animated movie called City of Rott, about an old man with dementia fighting zombies with his talking walking frame. Sudol wrote, produced, animated, scored and did the voices for the film. Credence Filter reminds us of that film. This is a strange looking indie RPG about a middle aged man with a rake fighting to stop a second apocalypse after failing to stop the first. Charlie Carlo appears to be doing everything in this strange, surreal game.

Arms of Telos

DEVELOPER OVERPOWERED GAMES
PUBLISHER OVERPOWERED GAMES
DUE EARLY ACCESS
armsoftelos.com

5

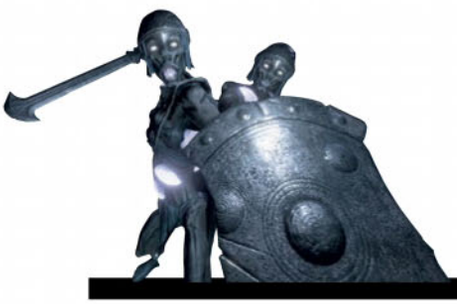
A kind of racing/FPS hybrid with a focus on Capture the Flag, Arms of Telos looks dizzying and not a little bonkers – in a good way. Players pilot fast moving, three storey tall spider-mechs across maps that take them through open space and the interior of asteroids, from zero-gravity 6DoF to more traditional ground-based combat. Each mech can be kitted out with two weapons and two pieces of equipment, the former to damage your enemies and the latter to aid you getting around the rings faster and more efficiently.

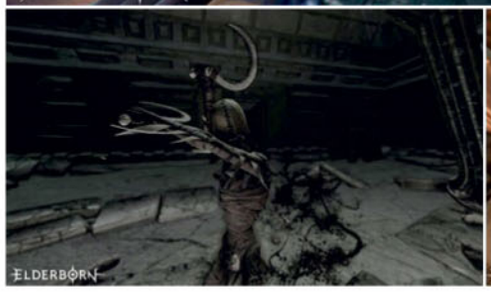


Elderborn

DEVELOPER HYPERSTRANGE
PUBLISHER HYPERSTRANGE
DUE 2018
hyperstrange.com

6





▲ First-person melee games are few and far between. There are heaps of games that feature melee in amongst shooting, but games dedicated solely to going toe to toe with opponents are rare as hen's teeth. Enter Elderborn. It doesn't seem to have much in the way of plot – you're the strongest warrior of a nomadic tribe undergoing trial by combat in search of the secret to eternal life or something – but the combat looks tense and solid. And it's set to metal music.

7

Just Us

DEVELOPER DRY EEL DEVELOPMENT • **PUBLISHER** DRY EEL DEVELOPMENT • **DUE** EARLY ACCESS
justusgame.com

▲ Most survival game pitches leave us a little cold, but there's something wonderfully simple about Just Us. After the oceans rise due to global warming, a couple try and survive on a secluded island. Neither is an expert in survival, but until recently that didn't matter. There was a community on the island, but everyone aside from you and your partner has disappeared. Can you get by with your rudimentary skills in hunting, building, crafting and fishing? Can you discover what happened to the others? Can you remain at the top of the food chain?

8

Eden Falling

DEVELOPER RAZOR EDGE GAMES • **PUBLISHER** RAZOR EDGE GAMES • **DUE** TBA
razoredgegames.com

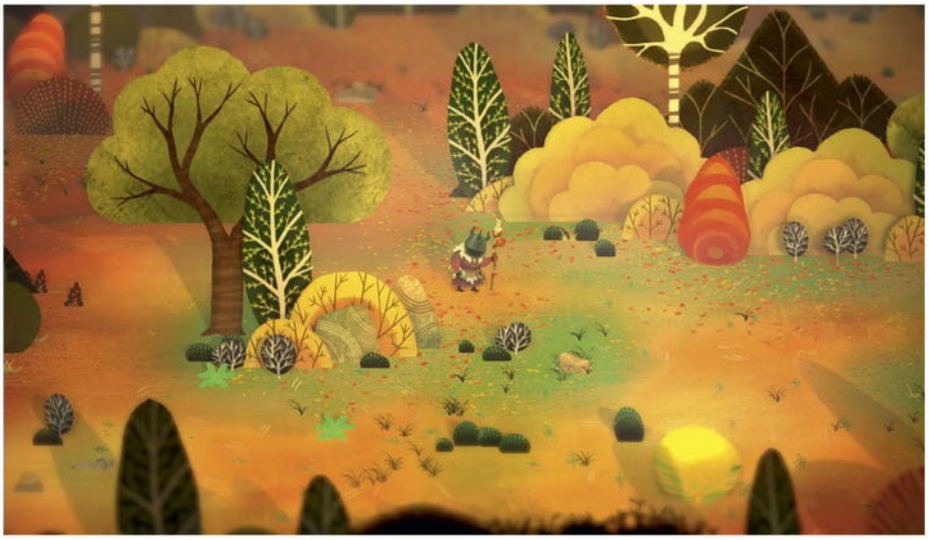
▲ A hugely ambitious post-apocalyptic turn-based RPG, Eden Falling takes place after the world has been devastated by an asteroid carrying a toxic fungus. The survivors group into factions, fighting against each other and the elements for survival. We're not being hyperbolic when we say the game is super ambitious; there are apparently over 30,000 locations to visit, and players can tackle the game solo, with co-op partners or join a shared server in which other survivors try and make their way in the new world.

Wattam

9

DEVELOPER FUNOMENA
PUBLISHER ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE
DUE 2018
www.funomena.com

▼ From the mind of Keita Takahashi, the genius behind Katamari Damacy, comes another game about doing stuff and we couldn't be more excited. To summarise the trailer of the game. An orange looks worried and runs from something. A mouth with legs eats the orange and some meat then poops. A tree eats the poop. Things explode and everyone is in a box. The box is running. There are around 100 unique characters in the world of Wattam, and it's up to you to explore the relationships be3tween these characters. There will be poop. There will be joyful explosions.



Wytchwood

DEVELOPER ALIENTRAP • **PUBLISHER** ALIENTRAP • **DUE** 2018
www.alientrap.com

▲ The gorgeous storybook art of Wytchwood is instantly evocative of the myths and fables from which the game takes inspiration. As the old witch of the woods, players will explore the land, collect ingredients and materials to craft spells, items and enchantments and use them to reward or punish the characters or creatures she encounters. Turn princes into frogs, use your wits to solve puzzles and your cunning to defeat the creatures of the woods. Sounds rad.

10

IT'S ALL ROT TO GO!

We talk to Fat Shark about adding Chaos to the mix, and go hands on with its latest co-op sequel.

Fat Shark's Warhammer: The End Times - Vermintide was in some ways a very confusing game. Well, no, let me rephrase: combined with an oddly triple-barreled name, the game was set in the Old World of Games Workshop's venerable Warhammer setting just as that game was being phased out (see: The End Times) in an apocalyptic meta-event that saw the release of a whole new setting and rules-system, Age of Sigmar. Combined with Creative's Total War Warhammer titles, video games are now the only place you'll find that gothic, grim, Germanic take on a typical fantasy setting.

The game itself, though, was a true sleeper hit. Not huge, but critically well-received, and a tonne of fun to play; as an old-hand of Warhammer myself, Vermintide ticked all the boxes. It borrowed heavily from Left 4 Dead, pitting four players against onrushing hordes of Skaven - mysterious, chittering rat-men (see: tide, vermin) with a diabolical love of arcane machinery and, well, the apocalypse. Across a range of linked scenarios you had to blow up stuff, rescue stuff, discover stuff, and kill stuff, all while face off challenging combinations of Skaven of various types; you could be swamped by an near-endless horde of easy to kill slaves, have to handle slightly harder to kill clan-rats, often run away from heavily armed patrols of elites, and get terrified by giant rat-ogres, all orchestrated by a clever AI that paced things for maximum drama.

WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE 2

DEVELOPER FAT SHARK • **PUBLISHER** FAT SHARK
DUE EARLY 2018
www.vermintide.com

Look at these two guys, just hanging around.

Not quite as many torches as at an "alt-right" march in the US.

Vermintide also added much more involved melee play into the mix, as well as a loot system, some basic crafting and upgrades, and lots more bodies on spikes.

It's a hard game to improve upon, mainly because the simple premise - Left 4 Dead, but with rats and swords! - was so elegantly executed that you could almost just let the base game run and add lots of DLC. But no, Fat Shark's bringing us a whole new Vermintide, and not only do the Skaven return, they've brought along some buddies in the shape of the forces of Chaos.

So, just how many End Times can one party of brave adventurers face?

VERMINTIDE 2: ECLECTIC BOOGALOO

Ultimately, Vermintide 2 follows that same elevator pitch as its prequel: plucky heroes, hordes of things to kill, loot, repeat. And the End Times are continuing, even if that bit's been dropped from the name (my keyboard is very happy about this) - this is one looong apocalypse. However, this time around Fat Shark's added new elements to pretty much every established aspect of the game, and that's particularly apparent when you look at how the new Career system works.

Let's take a look at the little guy, Bardin Goreksson. Like in the first game, he can played as a Dwarven Ranger, and get a good mix of ranged and close-in fighty abilities, or he can be played as either an Ironbreaker or a Slayer. The Ironbreaker is a heavily armed tank, basically, capable of taking damage and remaining the focus of combat, with some ranged versatility. The Slayer, on the other hand, is a total melee machine, half-naked and crazed, but without any ranged ability, because that's too much like those pointy-eared elves and yuck. Each of the five characters has three careers, making for a much wider range of combinations within with the four player party.

Each career gives players an always-on passive ability, and an active ability. Looking at the human warrior Markus Kruber, in his Foot Knight career he gets a passive ability called Sigmar's Blessing which gives the chance for the damage he takes to be converted instead into health, while his active ability is Valiant Charge, which pretty much does what it says on the tin, allowing Sir Markus to rush forward and bash some bad guys. Kerillian's Shade career, on the other hand, can become effectively invisible and even pass through enemies, while her passive is a damage increase while she's attacking from behind.

"The Career system really boosts player's hero fantasies a lot more than what the different Heroes did in Vermintide 1," Game Designer Victor Magnuson told us when we asked him about the way these new careers could combine. "Let's say a player wants to be the tanky character in the team, standing at the frontline and really taking the brunt of the attackers on protecting their allies, both the career skill and the career trait of Bardin's Ironbreaker Career will let them shine in that scenario allowing the rest of the team to focus on doing damage either as one of the melee focused careers or from afar as one of our more ranged focused careers."

If you play with a regular group - I always played pick-up groups, myself, so it will remain to be seen if this greater variety helps a pack of random murder hobos work any better together - you'll really be able to handcraft a group with complementary skills and abilities.

"We have designed the Career skills to really reinforce the core of any of the 15 different Careers available in Vermintide 2," Victor added. "And we are really excited to see how players mix and match to find their optimal setup, which will differ dependent on the mission at hand."

Deeper talent trees also offer more customisation of the game, and again, each career has a unique tree of their own. So, not only will no two Bardins necessarily be the same Career, even two Slayers could be quite different when you factor in talents, and then equipment.

There's also a lot more loot and gear on offer this time around. There are over 50 types of weapons, for instance, ranging from hand crossbows to particularly lethal-looking spears, and they cover all the various careers, and loot drops will also be more focused to who and what you're playing. There'll be different hats, too - because hats - trinkets, crafting items, and other stuff to further customise your character.

One particular interesting new bit of loot are Heroic Deeds. These are one-shot quests that offer a very specific challenge - kill this particular enemy type, with a certain weapon, for instance. These mix-up the gameplay to give a short, sharp, one-off experience and a different kind of challenge apart from the usual "kill all the things" gameplay of the base game.

And while the game has greatly expanded in terms of the action, even your time between games has been spiced up. Rather than hang out in a seedy tavern, you now operate from a much larger keep, where you can pick you missions, show off trophies, and even test out new skills.

"The area in itself is much larger, so there will be a lot more areas to jump around in," Victor told us. "Our ambition is that each player's keep should reflect their progress in the game at a much more substantial level than what it did in the first game. Players will be able to unlock entire areas of the keep that were locked away when they first started out their adventure."

I can't wait for more skilled players to see how crap I really am when they come visiting. Oh well.

MAKING A BETTER VILLAIN

While the rats are back in impressive numbers, the new Rotbloods make for an entirely different fighting experience. These bigger, stronger foes are worshippers of the Chaos god Nurgle, so it's a good thing that smell-o-vision has never caught on - they're putrid and diseased at the best of times. And they're also much harder to kill, and will require a different way of attacking. So, with so many interesting villains to choose from, why Chaos?

"It was partly because of the great contrast between the weaker, smaller Skaven and the heavy brutal warriors of Chaos but also due to lore reasons of what happens during the End Times," Victor says. "It made canonical sense."

Having visited the Fat Shark offices for the first game, I can attest that these guys take Warhammer seriously. There were at least a dozen complete and painted armies in

display for the tabletop game - and not just Skaven ones!

But the new villains, and how they work with the game's expanded Spawn Director - the system that directs what enemies spawn when and where - offered some interesting design opportunities.

"We've done a couple of things to expand the AI for the sequel, while trying to maintain the core gameplay and sense of what Vermintide's combat and enemies are about," Victor says. "The larger enemies introduced with the Chaos faction have their own ways of interacting with our slot system, which directs where and how enemies will encircle players in melee. At the same time, the enemies in general are better equipped to maintain contact with the player heroes, with an improved setup of mobility before and during attacks. Chaos brings tougher and more individually skilled fighters as opposed to the Skaven but the team has always worked with the goal to make them shine in any combination, providing great variety in every playthrough."

As we said, they are tougher, but in interesting ways. You can generally take down a basic Skaven with one blow, but Chaos Marauders require two or three to drop. Normally, you'd also be able to aim for the head for a one-shot kill, but that's the only place the basic fighters are armoured, so you'll just have to shoot and hack away at them. Some warriors are also equipped with shields, but by and large they're otherwise unarmoured, unlike the Chaos Warriors, towering enemies covered in rusted and pitted head to toe plate. Chaos Spawn are large, mutated creatures that are roughly equivalent to the Skaven's Rat Ogres, while the rotund Chaos Sorcerer may waddle around rather slowly - and be an easy target - but can teleport around the battlefield in between directing gouts of damaging putrescence at the party.

DEATH TO CHAOS! AND GIANT TALKING RATS! AND... THAT GUY!

And yes, it all does come together rather swimmingly. Well, that is, if you like swimming in gore and rat-bits.

We've only played two classes, each with the most basic career of that class - Markus' Foot Knight, and Kerillian's Shade - but they already show off an admirable depth to play and very different play-styles.

In both instances we're tasked with getting into a town, and inside the manor of an important and - by the sound of things - possibly traitorous NPC. The action shifts from a country lane, to a plaza before the city gates, and then into a warren of tunnels and streets inside the city, before a rather large boss fight against an aforementioned Chaos Spawn, after which our preview code ends - but not before hinting at another larger, nasty beasty, a troll-like mutant with two area effect weapons instead of hands.

It looks pretty nasty.

But getting there is typical Vermintide fun, and once inside the town there are two ways to approach the final fight, and each of those features built-up areas of buildings and hovels that you can negotiate in a few ways. It's not entirely open-world - the Spawn Director does seem to work better in linear environments - but in all the action and the claustrophobic spaces it feels like the player has much more choice. And, in each of our run-throughs, we saw quite a different array of enemies.

There's a particularly dramatic ledge in one part of the town; in one playthrough, Chaos Marauder's swarmed up that ledge, making for a dramatic cliff-top fight; then, at the bottom, the Sorcerer attacked us in our weakened state. In a second playthrough, we were able to traverse the ledge with ease, only to be swarmed by Skaven once on the ground, while a Skaven heavy appeared back up on the ledge to shoot down at us.

It's hard to really comment on how well the interaction between classes works, as we were playing with an AI that was very definitely programmed to stick with the active player, but playing as both Markus and Kerrillian offered very different experiences. I played Kerillian almost exclusively in the first game, but her Shade career feels like a whole new character. Her ranged weapon is a crossbow (some have suggested that Kerillian's careers represent the fact that the Elf races came together as one during the End Times, and that the Shade is a reflection of Warhammer's Dark Elves, which certainly makes sense), but one with a fifteen-shot magazine, capable of rapid-fire if you aim down the sights. Her melee weapon, however, is a spear, and it's a real pleasure to fight with. Combined with her speed, and her passive ability to do extra damage from the rear, Kerillian is an excellent skirmisher, darting around the flanks, shooting when she can, and then rushing in for some stabbing fun. Her active ability is particularly good for getting out of a tight spot, and she can even shoot while invisible. You do need to pick your moment with these abilities, as they do take a while to recharge.

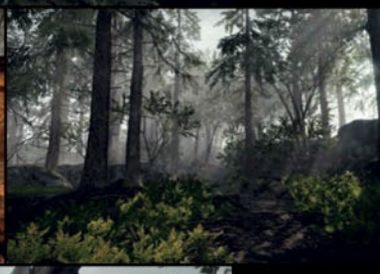
While Kerillian is agile - if a little… squishy - Markus' Foot Knight career comes with armour to spare, and a giant two-handed hammer that makes short work even of Marauders. It's slow, but it packs a hell of a wallop, and Sigmar's Blessing, while not a real game-changer, does let you stand in the front line a little longer in between necking healing potions. His Valiant Charge ability is great, though, especially if you need to come to a companion's aide in a hurry.

Both of the characters' melee weapons are also capable of blocking, but Kerillian's spear is more effective, lasting longer against sustained attacks than Markus' hammer.

It all adds up to a game that plays just as well as its predecessor in terms of pacing and action, but with a host of improvements that we've barely scratched the surface of. The demo code contains no loot, or interaction with the talent system. On top of that, the game will be fully mod-supported at launch, which adds a whole other layer of customisation and playability.

And the game only costs you $US27! With AAA games looking increasingly precarious in how they monetise games, it's marvelous to see a mid-tier developer offering a title which looks like amazing value. We cannot wait to see the Skaven horde return in full flight.
DAVID HOLLINGWORTH. PC

You'd be a fool to cross this dwarf, even with three allies.



In idle moments, erstwhile enemies stop to compare the size of their swords.

BLIZZCON 2017

In amongst the international touring bands, amazing cosplay and numerous panels at this year's Blizzcon, there were also a few rather important announcements about the Blizzard stable of games.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLE FOR AZEROTH

For the best part of a decade, World of Warcraft has been creeping away from the factional divide at the core of the WoW universe. Rather than the Horde and Alliance (Horde obviously being the superior faction) being at loggerheads, most expansions have essentially turned the two warring factions into uneasy allies fighting against a greater evil, such as the Lich King, the Burning Legion or Deathwing. Battle for Azeroth wants none of that. It's an expansion that should take the series back to its roots and pit the Horde and Alliance directly at each other again.

In addition to upping the level cap to 120, Battle for Azeroth also adds a host of new mechanics, locations and ideas that should see lapsed players coming back in droves.

THE HEART OF AZEROTH

All players will find a new legendary neck piece called the Heart of Azeroth. When the Heart is equipped, players will be able to unlock new powers and abilities in their armour. So far the system sounds much like the artefact weapon system introduced in WoW: Legion. From what we understand, the Heart and the powers it can unlock are tied directly to a resource in the game called Azerite. When the Heart gets close to Azerite it gains in level and can unlock latent powers in gear. Each item with unlockable powers features four rings with powers on them that can be unlocked. These powers are set so there is no RNG involved in the enterprise. All traits in armour are intended to be beneficial and tailored towards the class being played, so players won't end up with gear that is appealing in its base form but useless when levelled.

> "Battle for Azeroth should see lapsed players coming back in droves"

AZERITE ISLANDS

Azerite is somehow formed by the battles across time and is very volatile. Both the Gnomes and Goblins have invented technology to identify islands with high concentrations of Azerite. Harvesting the Azerite is a task for three player, class agnostic groups (there is no need for the usual tank, healer and DPS holy trinity). These small instances, known as Island Expeditions are intended to be run in 15-20 minutes and designed with dynamic replayability in mind. The Expeditions are randomly generated, so each playthrough can have different quests, Azerite locations, enemies, rare spawns, chests, capture points and the like. The only thing each Expedition will have in common is that a group of three AI controlled champions will also be trying to harvest your Azerite, giving players' incentive to go fast.

WARFRONTS

It's not all just island hopping and resource gathering in Battle for Azeroth, though the Warfronts definitely contain the latter. The first of these 20 player cooperative instances is Warfront: Stromgarde.

Taking many elements from the Warcraft 3, players first have to establish a base, then gather resources and take territories so they can upgrade their base with an armoury, barracks, warrior's hall and the like. The tech tree will be simple and similar to that seen in Warcraft 3. It's up to players to gather resources and develop their base so they can

Overwatch's new map is set in the theme park of Blizzardworld.

Moira can heal allies and damage enemies at the very same time.

raise an army that will be lead into battle against an opposing commander.

VOICE
While not as flashy as some of the other announcements, the fact that Battle.net voice is being integrated into WoW is nothing to be sneezed at. It's the same voice chat as used in Overwatch, but will feature both party and raid UI and will work across game sessions.

PVP
Dedicated PvP servers are going the way of the dodo with Battle for Azeroth. Instead of dedicated servers, PvP will now be an opt-in feature, with players choosing to be in PvP mode or not while in one of the capital cities. As an incentive for players to live on the wild side, Blizzard says it will offer some type of XP reward to players who quest while PvP is enabled.

VANILLA
Over the years Blizzard has shut down a number of unofficial vanilla (original WoW) servers due to copyright issues, but the demand for an old-school World of Warcraft server, untainted by any expansions is still high. Well, Blizzard is coming to the rescue with the World of Warcraft classic servers. The World of Warcraft Classic edition is currently in development, so there is no set release date for the servers at the moment. Whether or not the announcement will assuage angry fans remains to be seen.

HEARTHSTONE: KOBOLDS & CATACOMBS

The new Hearthstone expansion gives players the chance to collect 135 new cards and explore some of Azeroth's deepest dungeons in a new singleplayer mode that promises endless replayability thanks to the fact that no pre-built decks are required. Dungeon Runs are inspired by old-school dungeon crawls and feature a random, almost RPG style progression system through loot (card) drops. Players start a Dungeon Run with a novice deck of the class of their choice and battle their way through a progressively more difficult roster of foes drawn at random from a massive pool of unique bosses. Defeating bosses rewards the player with loot in the form of cards that bolster the power of the deck enabling further exploration of the dungeon. Some of the treasures drop exclusively in Dungeon Runs, so even the most PvP oriented player may want to have a go.

The rewards may be great but the stakes in Dungeon Runs are high – a single loss spells the end of a run.

OVERWATCH

MOIRA
Blizzard announced two new additions to Overwatch at Blizzcon – a new hero and a new map. Moira O'Deorain is a geneticist who turned to Blackwatch for support in the belief that Overwatch were holding back her scientific discoveries. From the short character video released at the event, it appears that this support healer/DPS is responsible for Gabriel Reyes' transformation into Reaper.

Moira's suite of powers is as follows, according to the official Overwatch site:

BIOTIC GRASP: Using her left hand, Moira expends biotic energy to heal allies in front of her. Her right hand fires a long-range beam weapon that saps enemies' health, healing Moira and replenishing her biotic energy.

BIOTIC ORB: Moira launches a rebounding biotic sphere; she can choose between a regeneration effect that heals the allies it passes through, or a decay effect that deals damage to enemies.

FADE: Moira quickly teleports a short distance.

COALESCENCE: Moira channels a long-range beam that both heals allies and bypasses barriers to damage her enemies.

There is no set release date for Moira at the moment, but given the turnaround between test realm balancing and release, she should be available in the next few months.

BLIZZARDWORLD
The other major Overwatch announcement made at Blizzcon is the TBD release of the BlizzardWorld map. A cross-game Blizzard themepark, BlizzardWorld features areas from all the popular Blizzard franchises and should have more than enough little Easter Eggs to keep the fans entertained. We haven't had a chance to play on the map as yet but we're sold. There's a blink and you'll miss it pun in the trailer that we dig - a food court called Snaxxramas is worth the price of admission. PC

Games 269

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMES

Loot boxing clever

It has not been a good month for EA…

So, how about those loot boxes?

We had a suspicion that Battlefront 2 might be bit of a stinker, which is why it's only gotten one page in this issue for a review – a radically small amount of real estate for such a hyped game. And you know what? We had no idea how right we'd be, particularly when it came to EA's mercenary take on monetisation. The company's removed loot box transactions – for now – but the damage is definitely done.

Disney was super unimpressed, as were fans. Governments all over the world are similarly pouty-faced, and consider EA's practice to be the equivalent of gambling – which is deeply problematic given the young age of many players. And it's all rebounded back on EA right in the wallet, too, with $US3 billion being wiped off the company's shares.

What can we say? Gambling really is bad for you.

David Hollingworth

Digital Editor

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POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

SCORING SYSTEM | PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

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Call of Duty: WWII

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WILKS: Am I the only one that thinks that returning to the WWII roots of the CoD franchise was a step backwards considering that the undisputed best games of the series came after Activision branched out from the tried and true setting? When there are so many wars, both historical and fictional to choose from, choosing instead to revisit what is possible the most well-trodden ground in gaming seems a little dull for me.

I know there has been a lot of love for the game in the press as a whole, and as with all CoD games, WWII is making money hand over fist, but as an experience I find the whole thing rather rote and uninspired, from the singleplayer campaign that hits every mark expected from a WWII game but does little else, to the buggy and laggy multiplayer that is rendered almost unplayable if your connection isn't superb. I'll get into some specifics later, but I just had to get the basics off my chest. I do not like this game. It's not terrible. It's just painfully adequate.

HOLLINGWORTH: No, it's not terrible, and there are moments of supremely polished game-making, if not anything close to artistry. But, at the same time, I must go even one further than you…

The game just flat out makes me angry.

I was genuinely excited for the idea of a return to CoD greatness (as opposed to cod greatness, because that really is a tasty fish), and maybe that's the problem; perhaps I bought into the hype a bit too far, but for every positive step the game makes, there are at least three great leaps backward.

In campaign terms, I don't think it can be summed up any better than a passage in the opening Normandy mission. I was genuinely getting into the game's rhythm, and impressed by the attention to detail of a particular German mortar emplacement, complete with range-finding markings chalked in, only to be completely dragged out of that pace by a particular galling and dumb quick time event. I almost stopped playing there and then.

Holy shit, do we really still need to make games like this?

WILKS: I was nearly in the same boat but I pressed on. I thought they were getting rid of the jump scare QTE early in proceedings, so I was OK with that. Imagine my surprise when this same thing happened multiple times through the single player campaign. I can understand one near stabbing and one reeling from shellshock after an explosion and then having to crawl in slow motion towards a gun to shoot a Nazi setpiece in a WWII game. They're essentially par for the course, but the fact that versions of those two events happened multiple times over the span of the campaign just felt lazy.

That said, there was one point in the campaign that I genuinely enjoyed. Rather than playing square-jawed farm-boy and ultimate warrior Ronald "Red" Daniels, you step into the shoes of a French Resistance fighter undercover in a Nazi stronghold in Paris, meeting a contact to get some explosives and then having to sneak through a Nazi controlled compound to place explosives on entranceways to allow Allied and Resistance fighters to storm the base. It's tight, fun and well-paced, relying more on gameplay and nuance than big explosive setpieces. It feels out of place, like someone slipped a scene from Ingourious Basterds into the middle of Saving Private Ryan, but it works. Of course, after that it's back to Red and his peerless skills as a sniper, anti-aircraft gunner, driver, grenadier, ninja.

HOLLINGWORTH: Yeah, he really is just best at everything, isn't he? Previous CoD campaigns relied on much wider use of multiple viewpoints, and I really feel that could have worked very well here, too.

But instead, we just get a cavalcade of well-worn character tropes, narrative beats, and those stupid knock-you-out explosions. I don't know, maybe that's what people want, but this game doesn't so much feel like a "return to its roots", but more as a game which has had so many rough edges polished off that it's become this bland, everyman shooter.

Just look at the weapons: with some minor differences in sound, they all feel pretty much identical. There's no real sense of character to them, which is something that CoD used to be best known for. I'm not sure how the devs have managed it, but they've even made the M1 Garand feel boring to use!

And while at least the campaign looks good - and it really does - the same cannot be said for multiplayer. Every bit of visual polish has been stripped away in favour of fast frames, and I think the game really suffers for it.

Look out, he's got an F in his hand and he's not afraid to use it.

> a cavalcade of well-worn character tropes, narrative beats and stupid explosions

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You prefer your heroes to be the chosen one
+ Your friend group is made up of: the farm-boy, the brains, the muscle and the Jew
+ You never get sick of Normandy landings
+ You like your dream sequences repetitive and obvious

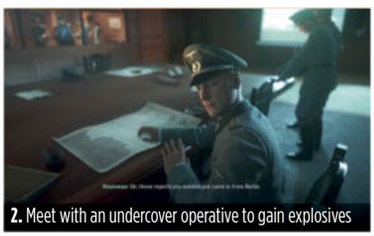
WILKS: It's less a return to roots than it is a poor cover band trying to play the hits without bothering with any of the slower, more nuanced tracks. The lack of difference between weapons - I could barely tell the difference between an M1A1, M1 Garand, KAR and Sturmgewehr - is really distracting in singleplayer, but I think it actually kind of helps in multiplayer, as no weapon feels overpowered and a must have, outside of a scoped weapon for sniping of course. Of course, the weapons being balanced in multiplayer only counts when you can get into and remain in a game, and that has not been the easiest thing for me. I have some pretty crap Internet at home but most online games play fine. The lack of dedicated servers and the peer-to-peer nature of the game really makes any connection I get a crapshoot and having a smooth game seems to be about as likely as being disconnected or being unable to do anything because latency is causing everyone to rubberband around the map. The hit detection seems to be a little off as well, but that could just be a factor of my connection.

HOLLINGWORTH: The other thing I kind of… well, no, I actually hate about multiplayer is that no one plays the badguys. I know we all like punching Nazis rather than playing them, but if you're going to offer World War II multiplayer, I want to be able to feel like I'm fighting badguys - or goodguys - with a totally different

SEQUENCE

WHEN THE GAME GETS GOOD

1. Brutally murder a Nazi commander



2. Meet with an undercover operative to gain explosives

3. Blow shit up and liberate Paris

The collar-straightening mini-game was a weird design choice.

weapon set. This is what makes games like Day of Defeat still so satisfying.

Instead, CoD: WWII lets everyone play as the Allies, and then just reskins the other side to look German. On top of that, the various cosmetic unlocks and similar loot-based shenanigans mean your own side ends up looking like they've fallen out of a clown car, instead of an LCI. It's balanced, sure, but I feel that too much has been sacrificed at the altar of that rather fickle concept.

Gotta say - I've already uninstalled CoD: WWII to make room for my entertaining things, like Excel spreadsheets and videos of dogs falling over. To be honest, I don't think I should be allowed to score this game.

WILKS: If I were to sum up my thoughts, which is exactly what I'm doing here, I would have to say that CoD WWII just plays things way too safe to be much fun. The singleplayer campaign is a series of loosely connected vignettes that feature every cliché and trope of WWII action with thoroughly predictable timing. The multiplayer is balanced, but after you've seen loot crates falling on Normandy beach you kind of lose hope. Zombies is about as successful as it gets in design, but it's not much different than what has come before so again feels like a re-tread. If CoD wants to be historical again, Activision and Sledgehammer should choose a different war. *DANIEL WILKS and DAVID HOLLINGWORTH* PC

SPOTLIGHT

WAR IS HECK

1. Health doesn't regenerate, so you have to make sure you have a supply of med packs (the little number).

2. The M1 Garand is still awesome. When you hear the "ting" in the middle of combat it's only slightly terrifying.

3. Squaddies give boons. This guy throws a medpack when you ask.

4. The boons have a cooldown timer, and you have to be standing next to the character to receive them.

5. Remaining Ammo, frag grenades and smoke grenades.

OR TRY THIS:

SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR
USA VS. CUBA & SPAIN, APR-AUG 1898
- Rough Riders and Buffalo Soldiers
- Disease

COD WAR 1
ICELAND VS. ENGLAND AND WEST GERMANY, 1958-1961
- Tactical fishing blockades
- Zero casualties

EMU WAR
AUSTRALIA VS. 20,000 EMUS, NOV-DEC 1932
- Lewis Guns
- Emus won

VERDICT:
Familiarity breeds contempt.

5

Star Wars Battlefront II

What a piece of junk!

DEVELOPER DICE / CRITERION GAMES / MOTIVE STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** EA • **PRICE** $89.99 • **AVAILABLE AT** ORIGIN, RETAIL
ea.com/en-gb/games/starwars/battlefront/battlefront-2

Greed is the path to the Dark Side. Greed leads to microtransactions. Microtransactions lead to loot crates. Loot crates lead to suffering. But I'm not even going to take the microtransactions into account for this review. Why? Well, they were turned off at launch and were still off at the time of review. Also, they're far from the only problem with the game.

But first, some good stuff. Star Wars Battlefront II's presentation makes me starry-eyed. It certainly looks and sounds pitch-perfect, whether it's the Dice-forged multi, Motive-built campaign (which is a love letter to Star Wars fans), or Criterion-constructed Starfighter Assault.

Criterion has, mercifully, rebuilt the starfighter handling from the ground up, and it's a lot of fun. It doesn't have the depth of a space sim, of course, but it makes Dice's Fighter Squadron mode look like Jar Jar Binks by comparison. Starfighter Assault is the most fun I had with Battlefront II outside of the campaign. From the tweaked handling, the busy but informative UI, and the sheer joy of dogfighting, this is the Star Wars dogfighting you've been looking for.

Interestingly, it's the prequels that shine in this mode, with the varied starfighters and better objective-based maps. It's just a damn shame that the progression system is tied to loot crates.

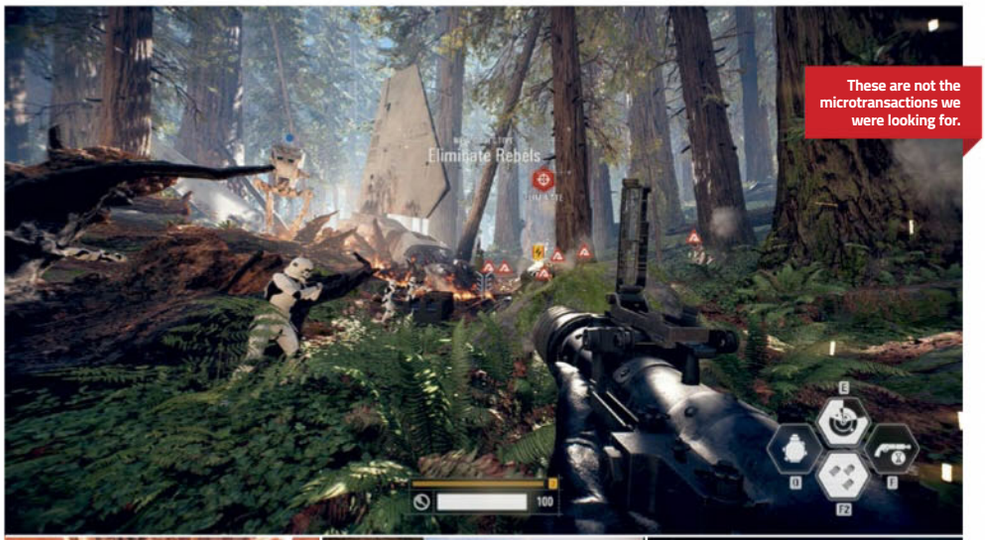
This isn't relegated to Starfighter Assault; it's rampant across Battlefront II, and it's the biggest gameplay flaw of all multiplayer modes. In a hidden progression system, play time isn't at all linked to progression of that role. Instead, ranking up a trooper, special unit, hero, villain, starfighter, or hero/villain ship is exclusively determined by the number and quality of Star Cards you have for that role.

The best way to get Star Cards is from loot crates. Otherwise, you're reliant on crafting parts to purchase or upgrade Star Cards to rank-up your roles, which lets you personalise up to three ability slots, depending on your rank. There's an added catch. While troopers have a mix of passive and active Star Cards – the latter of which are restricted to specific slots, which is actually balanced – every other role has only passive ability Star Cards. These passive Cards impact base values like damage, health, and cooldown times.

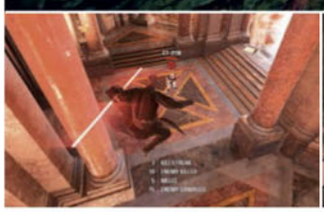
It means luck plays a bigger role than it should, in terms of loot crate dice rolls. In fairness, there are moments of fun to be had, in almost every mode. Clutch moments make you feel godlike, and close matches are great. But they're a rarity, because there's no team balancing, in terms of skill, or even numbers. Hell, you can't even switch teams, and there's still no server browser for multiplayer.

It's a damn shame because there is a solid, accessible shooter experience buried beneath these balancing issues. Future updates might help it, but if my time with the game is any indication, where the smaller modes are already dying, the community likely won't stick around long enough to wait for the necessary hydrospanner work.

NATHAN LAWRENCE PC



These are not the microtransactions we were looking for.



"ranking up is exclusively determined by the number and quality of Star Cards you have"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You want pitch-perfect Star Wars aesthetic
+ You want to play a Campaign that's a canonised love letter
+ You're a fan of fidelity, frames, and FOV
+ You love RNG more than meaningful progression

OR TRY THIS:

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT
DICE
+ No loot-crated progression
− No-one is playing

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II
PANDEMIC STUDIOS
+ The best Battlefront, too
− U-G-L-Y, it ain't got no alibi

BATTLEFIELD 1
DICE
+ Shows Dice gets FPS balancing
− But then Dice made Battlefront II

VERDICT:

There's fun to be had, but for every step towards the Light Side, there's a foot stuck firmly in the Dark Side of bad design decisions.

5

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Battlerite

A MOBA without the filler

DEVELOPER STUNLOCK STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** STUNLOCK STUDIOS • **PRICE** $29.99 USD (ALL CHAMPIONS PACK) • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
www.stunlockstudios.com

If you take a game like League of Legends, remove all the items, lanes, minions and long drawn out matches, Battlerite is what you'd be left with. Whilst it's clearly taking heavy inspiration from the MOBA genre, Battlerite instead cuts straight to the PvP battles and calls itself a Team Arena Brawler (TAM). Some of the other key differences include redesigning the control scheme where movement is done using the WASD keys and every attack being a skill shot with a cooldown attached to it.

Battlerite comes with an easy to follow tutorial that explains every facet of the game's fundamental dynamics from loadouts to special moves and should quickly bring any player up to speed on how to approach the game. Battles are either 2v2 or 3v3 and matches are won by being the first team to win three rounds. Even though a typical round lasts about two minutes, the game entices players to close their proximity with health power-ups that spawn in the centre of the arena, forcing teams to engage with one another, and teams can quickly snowball to a win or loss.

Where this gem of a title truly excels though is that it has an incredibly high skill ceiling whilst still remaining very accessible. The main keys to victory lie in outplaying and outwitting your opponents, knowing the right time to go all in and having tight team cohesion. For the more competitive gamers out there, knowing things like which champions have invincibility frames, counters and maximising your preferred style of play with your preferred customised loadouts, quickly becomes intrinsically rewarding as well as addictive. Battlerite feels like a game that rewards hours spent with more skill to overcome your opponents.

Don't call it a MOBA; it's a TAM.

> "the main keys to victory lie in outplaying and outwitting your opponents"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You're a competitive gamer
+ You love MOBA's but hate the length of the games
+ Intrinsic reward is your thing

Gamers are really getting behind this title and the community continues to organically grow, and as a result finding a match was never an issue. The developers are also showing continuous support and, at of the time of writing this review, have added yet another champion to its roster, bringing the total number to 22. For all these reasons and more it should come as no surprise that Battlerite is shaping up to potentially have a very healthy future in the esports scene with competitions growing in popularity all over the world.

Battlerite knocks it out of the park on almost every level. It's a highly competitive games that's also accessible with an easy learning curve. Every loss is more like a learning experience and every victory feels earned. For many multiplayer games out there this is a rare combination to get right, but thankfully Battlerite finds that perfect mix with every facet feeling like it has thought and meaning. The only minor criticism is that the UI can often be a bit unintuitive when changing things like mounts or layouts, but hopefully this will be fixed in the near future. This one definitely deserves a place in everyone's library. *ADAM RORKE* PC

OR TRY THIS:

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS
RIOT GAMES, 2009
+ Incredible depth
− Long games

HEROES OF THE STORM
BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, 2015
+ Simplified dynamics
− Less depth

DOTA2
VALVE CORPORATION, 2013
+ 115 Heroes!
− Steep learning curve

VERDICT:

A well designed competitive brawler that separates itself from the crowd. Battlerite is as rewarding as it is addictive.

9

Seven: The Days Long Gone

Been caught stealing

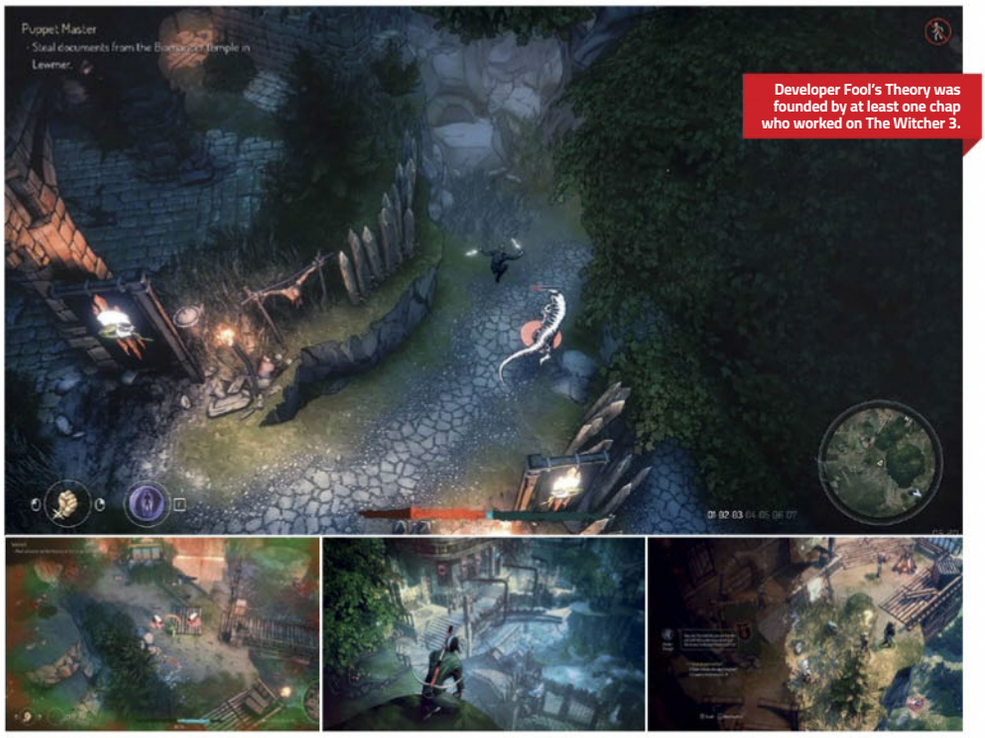
DEVELOPER FOOL'S THEORY • **PUBLISHER** IMGN.PRO • **PRICE** $29.99 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM, HUMBLE
seven-game.com

What serves as the tutorial to Seven: The Days Long Gone is an excellent example of how to lead people into a game. Teriel, a master thief and bit of an arsehole has plans to pull off the impossible heist, a job that every other thief has thought about in some way. Those brave or stupid enough to try failed, died or disappeared. Everyone else didn't even bother to try. Bringing in a fellow thief to act as a distraction and spotter, Teriel must sneak past dozens of guards unnoticed, infiltrate a mansion, search for a hidden device of unknown power and hack security systems to disable cameras. Being caught all but means death. Teriel can fight, but he's not equipped for massed battle, so more than a single guard will kill him. It's a fun new approach to the isometric action RPG, a genre usually typified by players clicking on everything until it dies, than nuanced, thoughtful stealth.

Of course this heist isn't all it seems, and due to some underhanded political machinations Teriel, now possessed by an ancient, rather dickish daemon finds himself on the prison island of Peh. The island of Peh, and the Vetrall Empire it is part of, are both fascinating. It's a post-post-apocalyptic world, a civilisation rebuilt 1000 years after the advanced society that came before crumbled. The new world is a mix of magic and technology, with the authorities having access to far greater and more powerful technology than the citizens, let alone prisoners on a penal island.

Peh is a partially gated open world, with players free to go anywhere as long as they have the requisite equipment or correct "passport" - a genetic marker that allows them access to different areas of the island. Players are free to explore areas but there are some things they must keep in mind at all times - being caught stealing will get you dead, as will going places you don't belong. As a master thief, Teriel can hide in shrubs, shadows, piles of trash and the like, and thanks to the day/night cycle, the behaviours and locations of NPCs change. There's a huge amount of freedom in how players approach both the main quest and the side quests, and this, ironically, is where problems with the game lay.

There is a level of verticality to Seven not seen in other isometric ARPGs. This allows for a greater level of exploration and freedom of movement, but it also leads to the game feeling a little too loose and hard to keep track of. Thanks to a general lack of detail in quest descriptions and an almost total lack of direction, solving some quests feels like random happenstance, while others feel like a strange grind to an unknown destination. It can get quite frustrating at times but there are still enough interesting quirks, encounters and heists to keep you coming back. Fool's Theory, the studio behind Seven: The Days Long Gone may be new, but it's definitely one to keep an eye on. Seven might not always be successful, but it's constantly intriguing nonetheless.
DANIEL WILKS PC



Developer Fool's Theory was founded by at least one chap who worked on The Witcher 3.

> being caught all but means death. Teriel can fight, but he's not equipped for massed battle

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You like studios founded by ex-CD Projekt Red senior quest designers

+ You're a little sick of all the clicking and killing

+ You want to rob from the rich and give to yourself

OR TRY THIS:

MIDDLE EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR
MONOLITH, 2014
+ Vertically inclined action
− Shadow of War

STYX: SHARDS OF DARKNESS
CYANIDE STUDIOS, 2017
+ Stealth and verticality
− Styx

GOTHIC 3
PIRANHA BYTES, 2006
+ Complete player freedom
− No real direction

VERDICT:

The lack of focus can be frustrating, but the world is so interesting that it'll draw you back in.

8

Football Manager 2018

It's a game of two halves

DEVELOPER SPORTS INTERACTIVE • **PUBLISHER** SEGA • **PRICE** US$60 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM, RETAIL
sigames.com

When you buy this year's edition of Sports Interactive's venerable management sim you actually get two games. The first is Football Manager 2018, a formidable database heaving with nested spreadsheets, endless tabs of exhaustive statistics, and a dizzying number of ways to exert your influence over proceedings. The second is Football Manager 2018 Touch, a misleadingly titled stripped-down version of the first game and the only one of the two, I think, that is worth your time.

In its non-Touch form, FM18 is gargantuan, a bloated, obese beast that doesn't so much suffer from feature creep as feature gorge. It has sat there, over the past few years, stuffing its ravenous maw with every new football-related trend, eager to regurgitate marketing buzzwords onto a press release to announce this season's new tactic. There are manager mind games to engage in with rivals, pre-match questions to fend off in the tunnel, social media feeds relaying via hashtags what the fans really think, and this time round a squad dynamics system that tasks you with accommodating player morale among the various social groups your squad splits itself into. It is all so desperately, crushingly, pointlessly tedious.

The issues are twofold. One, there is almost never a sense any of it actually makes a difference. You told the press before a local derby that you were "passionately" "expecting a big performance" from your star striker. He then fails to register a shot on target. Were these related? Was there any cause and effect at work? Who knows. So next time you get asked a question about your star striker, you just guess at an answer and hope for the best.

> "a bloated, obese beast that doesn't so much suffer from feature creep as feature gorge"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You are constantly disappointed by your real life football team

+ You know the difference between work rate and determination

+ You enjoy shouting at fully grown men

The other issue is that it slows everything to a crawl. This is a game that is relentlessly nagging you. In between matches you'll be clicking through countless notifications, most of which don't actually ask you to do anything. And it takes forever. I was playing with a small player database to ensure the fastest possible performance and I spent far more time sitting and watching a loading bar than I ever did playing a game.

In its Touch form, FM18 is lean and trim, the result of careful pruning of its most egregious excesses. It realises that the fantasy of the football management sim is thinking you can lead your favourite team to glory better than its current real life manager. As such, Touch prioritises the basics: picking a team, choosing a playing style, buying and selling players, and that's pretty much it. There's depth there, if you want it; you can still go in and tweak training regimes or instruct your winger to cross from the byline more often. But it doesn't weigh you down with all the minutiae. And it's fast, too.

Sports Interactive is advertising FM18 Touch as a "free bonus" with FM18. I'd say it's worth the price of admission alone. *DAVID WILDGOOSE* PC

OR TRY THIS:

GRAHAM ARNOLD
SYDNEY FC
+ Our most successful local coach
− Not as tactically progressive as Postecoglou

GUUS HIDDINK
UNEMPLOYED
+ Has coached us at the World Cup before
− Not exactly a forward looking appointment

SAM ALLARDYCE
UNEMPLOYED
+ Would ensure against relegation
− You can't actually be relegated in a World Cup

VERDICT:

Like Leicester winning the Premier League, FM18 Touch knocks over its more fancied rival.

8

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Nioh

Ronin beating

DEVELOPER TEAM NINJA • **PUBLISHER** KOEI TECMO • **PRICE** US$50 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
koeitecmoeurope.com/nioh/pc

Dark Souls is a genre now. From 2D transplants like Salt & Sanctuary to sci-fi riffs such as The Surge, there are enough games now aping the Souls approach to formalise the genre. Team Ninja is a Japanese studio best known for its Ninja Gaiden character-action games on Xbox. Nioh is almost exactly what I expected from Team Ninja trying its hand in the Dark Souls genre: it's Souls but with faster, more technical combat and set in a world of dojos and demons.

Oddly, you play an Irish chap named William who travels to Japan, finding himself the missing link between the Anglo-Spanish war and the Shogunate wars around the turn of the 16th century. The story is periphery, however - more straightforward, less evocative than a Souls game - and mostly confined to cut-scenes that bookend missions.

William may be a specific person but you're free to customise his stats as you level up. There are five melee weapon types (sword, spear, axe, dual swords and the pick and chain combo kusarigama) each with their corresponding stat. Spear damage scales with your Heart stat, for example, but Heart also boosts your Ki (or stamina meter), meaning level up decisions are a constant tug of war between material choices.

There are ranged weapons, too - bows and guns - to help with thinning out enemy ranks from distance, as well as "ninjutsu" tools (shurikens, poisons, traps, etc) and "onmyo" magic (a plentiful, and to my mind essential, array of buffs and debuffs). The latter two, plus all melee weapons, even have their own unique skill trees containing all kinds of additional moves and abilities to unlock over the course of the game. There is, to be blunt, a lot of RPG here.

Honestly, who needs a shield when your sword is that long.

> "meaning level up decisions are a constant tug of war between material choices"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You're on team ninja
+ You know what a yokai is
+ You can keep Ki pulsing all night
+ You can throw shuriken without cutting your fingers

But the meat of the action remains the combat. Regardless of which melee weapon you're currently using, you'll be hitting enemies with either a light attack or a heavy attack, or tapping out some combo involving both. You'll be guarding against attacks or swiftly stepping aside to dodge them. You'll also be switching between stances - low for better defence, high for better attack, mid somewhere in between - the distinct movesets of each stance allowing you to tailor your approach depending on the enemy at hand.

Crucially, switching stances at just the right moment after an attack will instantly replenish your lost stamina, called a Ki pulse, freeing you up to continue the offensive. Later you can unlock the ability to Ki pulse while dodging and you'll marvel at how you ever fought without it. Ki pulse is a revelation, a seemingly minor mechanic that utterly transforms the fundamentals of combat, from a cagey duel where you wait for the right moment to strike to a thrilling dance of lightning fast movement and flurries of blows.

Dark Souls may be a genre now, but with its fresh setting and wonderfully deep combat systems, Nioh proves it doesn't have to be generic. *DAVID WILDGOOSE* PC

OR TRY THIS:

BLOODBORNE
FROM SOFTWARE, 2015
+ Souls reborn
− Not on PC

WAY OF THE SAMURAI 4
ACQUIRE, 2015
+ Collect swords
− PS3 port

ONI
BUNGIE, 2001
+ Has the same syllables
− Spoils it with guns

VERDICT:
Nioh successfully reinvents Souls with deeper combat and skill trees.

9

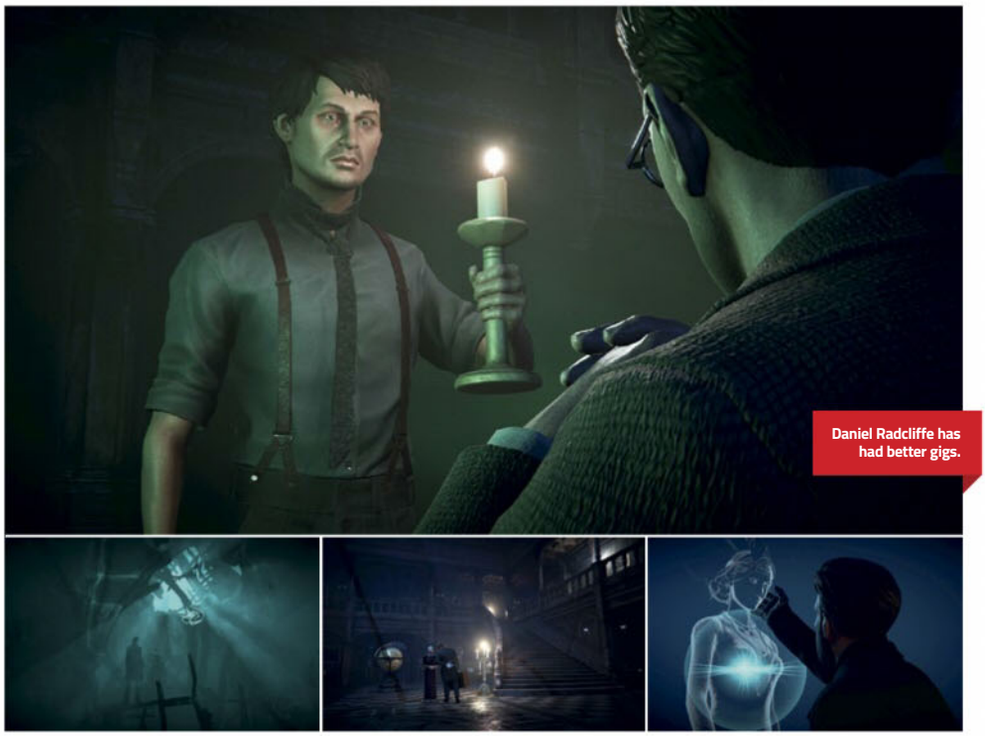
Black Mirror

At the mansion of madness

DEVELOPER KING ART • **PUBLISHER** THQ NORDIC • **PRICE** US$30 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
kingart-games.com

As soon as you start playing Black Mirror it feels both somewhat modern and something like a throwback. There's a good reason for this. Black Mirror is an original psychological horror story but it's also a reboot of a respected but barely remembered series of horror-themed point and click adventures, with three games published between 2003 and 2011. It feel old fashioned in the fact that it's not going for jump scares or survival horror style vignettes, but rather using the story characters and oppressive atmosphere to instil the player with a more nebulous dread. That said, the interface and pace of the game feels much more modern, with interactive objects or points of interest being highlighted and the puzzles being both logical and tactile. While not always successful, there's something kind of charming about Black Mirror. It wears its inspirations on its sleeve – the only readable books in a library when you first explore it are by H.P. Lovecraft and Poe, and everything revolves around things mankind was not meant to know.

It's refreshing to play a horror game that's more about atmosphere than it is about jump scares. It's 1926. Players take the role of David Gordon, a young man left a rather creepy ancestral home after the death (via self-immolation in the brief interactive prologue) of his father. Cue a distant and cold matron, a confrontational and unpleasant butler, a cadaverous groundskeeper, a mysterious boy, a sly lawyer and lots of spooky sounds. One of the very first quests sets up the tone of the game neatly. David, on his first night in the Gordon estate must explore the house and find his way into his father's study to find more information on what happened to him as none of the residents of the house seem willing or able to tell him any details of the death.



Daniel Radcliffe has had better gigs.

> "the only readable books in a library when you first explore it are by H.P. Lovecraft and Poe"

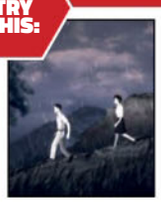
WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You have an inheritance coming
+ You like your controls a bit clunky
+ You hide your secrets behind puzzles
+ You hide the solutions to your puzzles near the puzzles themselves

This involves sneaking around the house by candlelight, eventually finding an old writing desk in the library, solving a multi-part but logical puzzle to open a secret compartment in the desk, finding a key, using that to open the study doors, then solving another puzzle to uncover some information. All the while there are spooky noises in the background, and the flickering of candlelight. It's quaintly charming.

The modern Black Mirror introduces a mechanic new to the series with interactive apparitions. These ghostly visions help flesh out the history of the Gordon clan and add a nice layer of the palpably supernatural to the game but they never really feel as though they are fully capitalised on. That's the problem with the game as a whole – it brings up some interesting ideas and hints at some fascinating situations, but as a whole the game plays it too safe to really nail scares or the cosmic dread of its Lovecraftian premise. It could be a matter of resources – Black Mirror doesn't look particularly great and lacks polish – or perhaps a factor of the mostly traditional adventure game format. Whatever the case, Black Mirror has a certain charm that makes it rather endearing, but ultimately it fails to live up to both its premise and the games that came before. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

OR TRY THIS:



DETENTION
REDCANDLEGAMES, 2017
+ Creepy school horror
− 2D

THE CAT LADY
HARVESTER GAMES, 2012
+ Unsettling, atmospheric adult adventure
− Disturbing

FRAN BOW
KILLMONDAY GAMES AB, 2015
+ Creepy but uplifting psychological horror
− The art isn't for everyone

VERDICT:

Some great puzzles and interesting situations can't entirely make up for Black Mirror's shortcomings.

6

Road Rage

Don't scratch this itch

DEVELOPER TEAM 6 • **PUBLISHER** MAXIMUM GAMES • **PRICE** $29.99 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
www.maximumgames.com

Nearly everyone who played Road Rash back in the day has fond memories of motorcycle combat racing, hurtling around tracks hitting other riders with bats and chains causing them to wipe out. For something developed in 1991, it was a surprisingly nuanced game, with good physics, a large range of bikes and weapons, and even a system that allowed players to steal the weapon of another rider if they timed a punch right. It's now 26 years later and Road Rage, an open world spiritual successor to Road Rash has been released on Steam. To put it mildly, the game is a disaster from start to finish, squandering whatever goodwill nostalgia fond Road Rash memories may have garnered them on a shoddy open world, dull races, terrible combat and enough glitches for a handful of bad Steam games.

You play one of a handful of motorcycle gang members in a city locked down by the police. There is a story delivered via voiced text messages, but all it really serves to do is tell you where to go in the city to pick up your next mission. Actually, mission is probably too strong a word to use to describe what you have to do. Every text sends you to a location to take part in a race of some kind or other. You might just have to make it to checkpoints, or race through checkpoints while killing a few other riders, or race through checkpoints while evading cops. All the events roll into each other, becoming one endless motorbike race that occasionally rewards you with enough cash to buy a new bike to compete in the next endless race. If you don't manage to make enough cash or you need some upgrades to remain competitive in the race you're in, you can always take some side quests. These sidequests are identical to the main quests so you end up doing the same things again, and again, all for the privilege of going back to the main story to die from boredom all over again.

PCPP staff fighting over who doesn't have to review this. Yesterday.

> "squandering whatever goodwill nostalgia fond Road Rash memories may have garnered"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You shouldn't
+ You hate yourself
+ You want to look into the face of evil

The repetitive mission design would be forgivable if the racing physics and controls were good, but, if anything, it appears that even less attention went to them than the races themselves. Trying to take a corner at anything over snail's pace is a recipe for a fireball, but given how erratic the collision detection is, merely brushing up against a stray blade of grass or a pebble is just as likely to cause a bike to explode, whereas swinging a bat at someone's head seems as likely as not to glance off harmlessly or pass right through.

Road Rage does one thing right, and that's have some truth in advertising. There are roads in the game, roads that you'll ride down again and again due to the dimensions of the city, and it's guaranteed to fill anyone who prefers their games to be enjoyable with rage. It's a game so painfully limited, ugly and poorly put together that it's amazing that Maximum Games bothered to publish it.
TAVISH FORREST PC

OR TRY THIS:

FLATOUT 2
BUGBEAR ENTERTAINMENT, 2006
+ demolition racing
− FlatOut 4

ROAD REDEMPTION
PIXEL DASH STUDIOS, 2017
+ Road Rage done right
− We played Road Rage instead

GUTS & GLORY
HAKJAK PRODUCTIONS, TBA
+ Open world obstacle racing
− Early Access

VERDICT:
Lazy, broken, ugly and dispiriting.

1

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Tower 57

Trapped in an elevator just a few floors short of true art

DEVELOPER PIXWERK • **PUBLISHER** 11 BIT STUDIOS • **PRICE** $11.99 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
tower57game.com

Tower 57 evokes memories of the Bitmap Brothers' steampunk top-down 16-bit shooter Chaos Engine, and was kickstarted by developer Pixwerk with this idea made explicit.

The eponymous Tower has halted production (of... industry stuff) and a shadowy organisation not unlike the Pinkertons won't have any of that! So a team of three mercenaries are sent in to get production running again. They do this by shooting everything that moves and... well, also shooting everything that doesn't because that's how you get coins.

Coins can be exchanged for various character upgrades, new and better weapons, new and better cyborg limbs, and so it goes. Each character has a special weapon - mines, a time-slowerer (technical term), phoenix, etc - and can also engage Chaos Mode. This is basically a rechargeable smartbomb, but each character has a signature move. The Don for instance calls in a... uh... 1920s Bootlegger-style getaway car which yells "A wiseguy, huh?" and tommy-guns everything. That this car can appear even when the Don is stuck in a four foot wide corridor full of rampaging constructor bots is just part of the charm.

For the most part Tower 57 works. Despite kickstarting back in 2016 and promising a March 2016 delivery, Pixwerk (nee Benitosub) chose not to make it available for Early Access. This had the benefit of keeping the game fresh for the like of me, but with the possible downside of a lack of robust playtesting. Bugs remain. Occasionally getting stuck behind an indestructible settee is one thing, but room-triggers failing to open doors is quite another.

This really is a "what if we had gigabytes of RAM back in 1990" version of The Chaos Engine, from the fiction (dieselpunk) to the roster of mercs, to the bullet-hell to the kinda-but-not-really cartoonish gore-comedy writing.

The real Bitmap Brothers would of course be appalled at all the colour.

> this is a "what if we had gigabytes of RAM back in 1990" version of The Chaos Engine

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You enjoy both running and gunning
+ You want to summon impossible bootleggers
+ You love policewomen with giant hooks
+ You agree the Nintendo PowerGlove is for hacking (it's so bad)

Ironically, the Chaos Engine is available on Steam as well, and people who hate Tower 57 complain it's not as pure or as difficult as the Bitmap Brothers original... but over in the Chaos Engine reviews, everyone is just complaining it's a terrible port of the Amiga port (also, you can "only fire in eight directions!"). So which is better? The purist but primitive original, or the overwrought but evolved tribute?

The truth lies somewhere in between. Tower 57 stops tantalisingly short of the penthouse suite. Despite years of development, it's not a long game. The boss fights don't show much awareness of how far the Art of the Boss has come in recent years. It's surprisingly easy to upgrade your character to the point of near-invincibility early on in the game by gambling. Not every environment looks as great as every other. Big chunks of each level get "locked out" as you progress - though this could be seen as a pro for replayability.

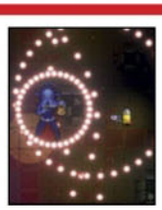
Fortunately, the music is excellent; bullet speed and impact have been tweaked to near-perfection; and the mix of different weapons will tempt you to play just one more level.

ANTHONY FORDHAM PC

OR TRY THIS:

THE CHAOS ENGINE
1993, BITMAP BROTHERS
+ A revered classic
− Not as good as you remember

THE BINDING OF ISAAC
2011, EDMUND MCMILLEN
+ Incredible depth and balance
− Increasingly dumb expansions



ENTER THE GUNGEON
2016, DODGE ROLL
+ True bullet hell
− Intolerable cuteness

VERDICT:

Solid twin-stick fundamentals executed to reasonably successful effect.

7

Oure

Cloud strife

DEVELOPER HEAVY SPECTRUM • **PUBLISHER** HEAVY SPECTRUM • **PRICE** US$20 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
oure-game.com

You can tell Oure was not merely inspired by the likes of Flower, Journey and Abzu, it desperately wants to be those games, to reach the same kind of thrilling, sweeping, almost transcendental heights thatgamecompany's output can hit at its best. Unfortunately, although Oure may desire to soar among the clouds, it remains a pedestrian experience.

You play a young child who has been mysteriously separated from her parents and finds herself in an abstract world in the sky. Clouds fill your view as far as the eye can see, a monotony broken only by the various vapour valleys, tunnels and mountains in the atmosphere, as well as the occasional man-made structure jutting out of the cloudscape. You explore this open ~~world~~ sky by transforming into a thin, willowy dragon and flying, pausing to return to human form only when near certain glowing symbols carved on the man-made platforms.

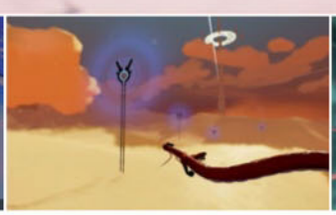
At first, flying feels liberating. The dragon can climb and dive, boosting to pick up speed and corkscrewing with abandon. The clouds themselves look lovely in soft focus and guiding the dragon, its body wriggling snakelike, through the fluffy fields and canyons can feel invigorating. But camera and control inconsistencies, especially prominent in tight spaces and when you're turning, often get in the way. I found that pushing forward, and steering with the camera controls rather than the movement controls, alleviated some but not all of the frustration. Of course, these are minor quibbles compared to the atrocious terrestrial controls that will have you misjudging jumps every time you set foot on the ground.

But the main problem is that there's simply not enough to do. You fly around collecting blue orbs (there are 750 of them dotting the cloudscape) which you then spend to activate a series of panels that power contraptions leading to a central spire. Complete a series and you unlock a boss encounter with a Titan. These are short, instanced scenes that have you flying over a giant creature, attaching yourself to it at specific points and performing a painfully simplistic line puzzle. These encounters look spectacular, but there's nothing to them, and you're asked to repeat the same meagre actions again and again.

Elsewhere, in addition to the 750 blue orbs (of which, by my estimate, you only need to find about 250 to complete the game), there are loads of other collectibles, none of which serve any great purpose. Some are accompanied by tiny scraps of story that are intended to evoke a sense of history, of a larger mythology to this enigmatic world, but they tend to mistake vagueness for profundity.

Games like Flower, Journey and Abzu succeed because they preserve a sense of wonder as you travel from one place to the next; in the ebb and flow of movement and music they chart an emotional range few games touch. All Oure made me feel was mild curiosity, irritation and, finally, boredom. *DAVID WILDGOOSE* PC

You'll need to collect more stamina orbs to reach the uppermost clouds.



> guiding the dragon, its body wriggling snakelike, through fluffy fields and canyons

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You have an insatiable craving for blue orbs
+ You thought there was way too much gameplay in Abzu
+ You just wanna chill out and chase the dragon

OR TRY THIS:

CLOUD
JENOVA CHEN/KELLEE SANTIAGO, 2005
- Where thatgamecompany began
- Only a student project

BIOSHOCK INFINITE
IRRATIONAL, 2013
- A spectacular city in the clouds
- Goes off the rails

ABZU
GIANT SQUID, 2016
- Everything Oure wants to be
- Not for the thalassophobic

VERDICT:

A minimalist experience that confuses collectibles for substance.

4

Sorry, James

Tales from decrypt

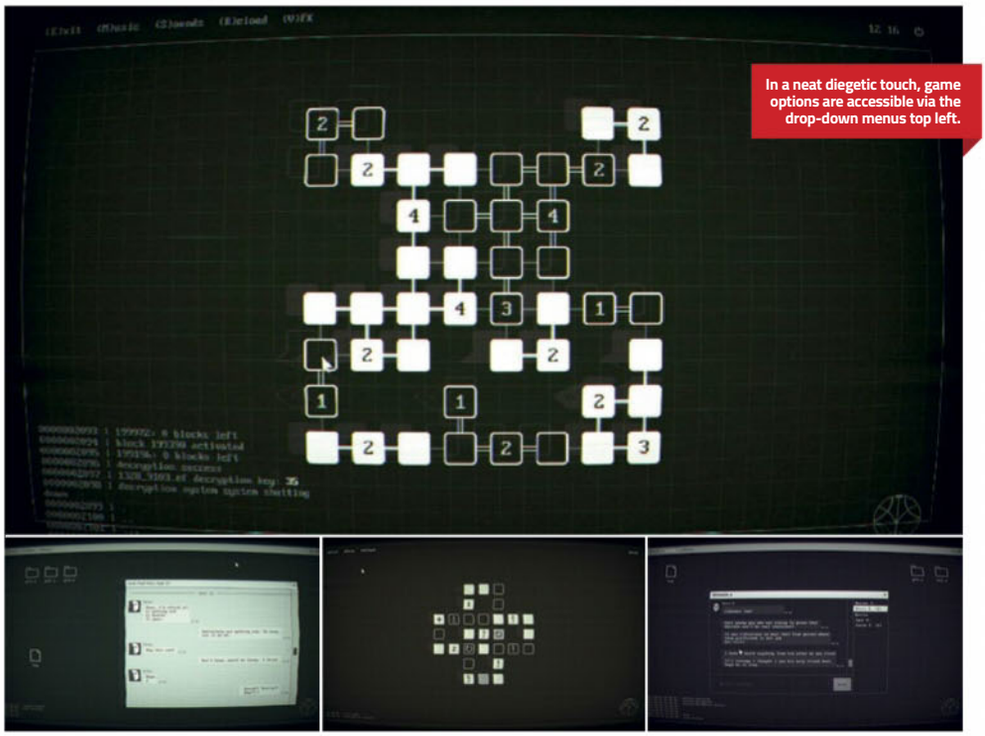
DEVELOPER KONSTRUCTORS • **PUBLISHER** KONSTRUCTORS • **PRICE** US$5 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
konstructors.com

The first thing Sorry, James asks of you is to enter a username and password. To clarify, it's not asking you to create a username and password, but to enter a specific username and password. No immediate clues are offered as to what you should type in the flickering monochrome CRT field. If you're like me you'll try a few things at random before scratching your head and wondering if you missed something vital. A few minutes later, after double-checking the game's Steam page to make sure you're not going mad, you'll crack it. The login, that is.

It's an unusual way to begin a game, throwing the player into the pool and trusting they'll figure out how to swim. Yet it sets the scene for a game that's all about making intuitive leaps across the gaps between seemingly discrete pieces of information.

You play a Cold War era security engineer named James Garner, which is either a baffling nod to the late Maverick and The Rockford Files star or merely a suitably American name the Russian developers just happened to like. After logging in to your '80s computer you're instructed by your colleague to decrypt a batch of files. Finish the first batch and she'll send you another. Just remember your job is only to decrypt them, she says, not to open them.

Decrypting a file introduces the primary puzzle mechanic. Each node on a grid can be assigned either a white cell or a black cell. Initially a few cells are already assigned white or black and the number written in the cell tells you how many like-coloured cells link to it. So, for example, a white cell with a "4" in it means four linked cells must also be white. It sounds simple, but like Minesweeper or Sudoku (two puzzles the developers cite as influences) there's a delicate balance found between rote process of elimination and logical reasoning.



In a neat diegetic touch, game options are accessible via the drop-down menus top left.

> after logging in to your '80s computer you're instructed to decrypt a batch of files

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You miss your old Hercules graphics driver
+ You like to know why you're solving those puzzles
+ You've always wanted to be James Garner

It also gets more complex as more elements are introduced, all of which manage to increase the challenge while neither feeling artificially difficult nor detracting from the elegance of the core mechanics. Sometimes there are links missing between nodes, or they're missing and you can also rotate the links to connect to different nodes. Soon, what might initially have posited only a few possible combinations of linked cells for you to consider now require you to contemplate what can feel like an endless supply of possibilities. While I breezed through early puzzles in mere minutes, many of the later ones had me running into logical dead-ends and restarting over and over again.

Once you've assigned all the relevant cells in a file, it decrypts and you can move on to the next one. Or perhaps you might be tempted to open it, disobeying your orders. I won't spoil what happens if you do start opening the files, but suffice to say you'll quickly find yourself mulling over a very different kind of puzzle, something rather more metaphysical and, ultimately, tantalisingly opaque.
DAVID WILDGOOSE PC

OR TRY THIS:

THE TALOS PRINCIPLE
CROTEAM, 2014
+ Metaphysical puzzler
− Overly serious, Sam

MINESWEEPER FOR WINDOWS
MICROSOFT, 1992
+ You already have it
− Threadbare story

SUDOKU
HOWARD GARNS, 1979
+ Your gran has books of it
− She's already filled them all in

VERDICT:

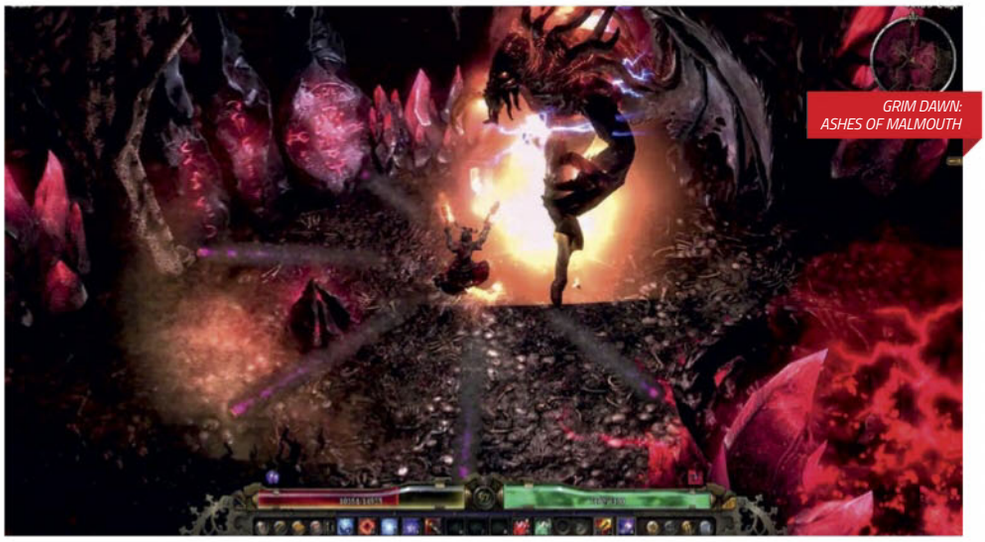
A smart, satisfying puzzler wrapped in an equally smart, satisfying narrative layer.

8

Grim Dawn: Ashes of Malmouth, Titan Quest: Ragnarok & Path of Exile: War for the Atlas

DEVELOPER CRATE ENTERTAINMENT, PIECES, GRINDING GEAR GAMES • **PUBLISHER** CRATE ENTERTAINMENT, THQ NORDIC, GRINDING GEAR GAMES • **PRICE** $17.99, $19.99, FREE • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
www.grimdawn.com, www.thqnordic.com, www.pathofexile.com

The last month or so has really been something of a tale of two gaming industries, one hell-bent on squeezing every single ounce of profit from its IPs through some remarkably predatory practises, and another that really seems to listen to their player base and work hard to keep them happy and loyal. Three excellent action RPGs all received (or in the case of Path of Exile, is set to receive) significant expansions, the development of one of them fully funded by microtransactions and another partially funded by the same.


GRIM DAWN: ASHES OF MALMOUTH

GRIM DAWN: ASHES OF MALMOUTH

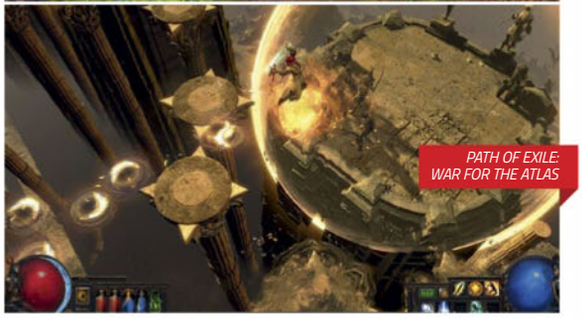
The first expansion for Grim Dawn adds an entire new act as well as two new masteries for players to experiment with. Developed by Crate Entertainment (former members of Iron Lore, the original developers of Titan Quest), Grim Dawn uses a hybrid character class system with players choosing two masteries and combining them into the final class. The two new masteries, the Necromancer and Inquisitor are about as opposite as the names suggest. The Inquisitor is an elemental ranged attack mastery, and the Necromancer is more geared towards pets, summoning and cold/vitality damage. With the two new masteries, there are now 28 possible classes. The level cap has also been raised from 85 to 100 and the Devotion tree (a secondary skill tree that allows for extra customisation) raised to 55. The new act itself is great, taking the fight to a new area dominated by the Aetherials, otherworldly, vaguely Lovecraftian beasts that possess beings and manipulate flesh.

TITAN QUEST: RAGNAROK

There is probably a little bit of marketing dickishness releasing a Titan Quest expansion so close to the release of the Grim Dawn expansion, but the fact that THQ Nordic and developer Pieces dropped a new Titan Quest expansion out of the blue is a miracle unto itself given the fact that it's coming a mere 11 years after the original game was released (though only a year since the Anniversary Edition). The expansion adds a new act, taking the players through Eastern European and Celtic lands and adds a new mastery, the Runemaster, an elemental combatant, to the mix allowing for a total of 45 different classes. The new act isn't exactly nuanced, but it's hugely fun to meet new and interesting monsters and click on them until they explode into loot.

> "meet new and interesting monsters and click on them until they explode into loot"

TITAN QUEST: RAGNAROK


PATH OF EXILE: WAR FOR THE ATLAS

PATH OF EXILE: WAR FOR THE ATLAS

In August, Grinding Gear Games released The Fall of Oriath, an expansion that changed the levelling process for characters, taking it from the traditional multiple playthough to reach endgame style used by most ARPGs, to a single ten act playthrough that takes characters from level one to endgame. War for the Atlas, the new expansion reworks the endgame, introducing 32 new maps (semi-randomised levels the player can craft to become more challenging) as well as a meta-game within the maps that sees a new villain warring against an established endgame boss to dominate the Atlas of Worlds (the map system). Players will be able to tailor their mapping experience by manipulating who is in control of different areas of the Atlas, guaranteeing certain challenges and increasing the potential of certain item drops. Not bad for a free expansion. Just goes to show that not everyone who has microtransaction in their game is a bad guy. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

DVD Contents

HOLIDAY SACK

With Christmas rushing at us with the speed of a Lear jet, grabbing time to scratch, breathe or enjoy some quality time in the smallest room seems to be becoming increasingly difficult. And this month's disk is only going to make matters worse. So, before diving head first into the sparkling waters of gaming awesome, please remember to catch your breath, take a moment and smile at the next person you see. The holiday period is a horrible, stressful time for many people and whether or not you celebrate Christmas, please remember that you aren't alone and there is always someone out there who will listen and care. Lifeline and Crisis services are available 24/7 and are always happy to listen and help. Finally, I would like to wish everyone out there a safe, joyous and peaceful time, full of love in whatever form it takes.

Live Long and Game On

Nichole (Chaos Lady)

12 FREE GAMES, DEMOS & UTILS!

- BLOKDODGE
- Brawl of Ages
- Coffee Run
- Deserving Life
- Duel of Summoners: The Mabinogi Trading Card Game
- Estranged Act I
- Find You
- Flightless
- Hereafter
- Idle Bouncer
- IKAROS
- Island Dash
- Lunarsea
- Madu Maths
- Mahjong Magic Islands
- Martial Arts Brutality
- Mothlight
- Office Space: Idle Profits
- Oldage
- Orake 2D MMORPG
- Over The Moonlight
- Puzzle Pirates: Dark Seas
- Pyramaze: The Game
- Relik
- SAS: Zombie Assault 4
- Scream Collector
- Sounds of Her Love
- The Pirate: Plague of the Dead
- Towards The Pantheon: Escaping Eternity
- TUNNEL DIVERS
- XXZ
- You Must be 18 or Older to Enter

SAS: Zombie Assault 4

Installation instructions included on the disc. Browse the disc and launch index.html for more.

USING THE DVDS
PC PowerPlay DVDs are suitable for use in almost any computer but the software contained on the medium is for Windows operating systems only. Because each PC is different, PC PowerPlay and Next Media cannot guarantee the DVDs will operate as expected on every system, despite strict adherence to Windows compatibility.

LOADING
The DVDs are set to autostart. On insertion it will load the DVD's Terms and Conditions of Use disclaimer in your default Web browser. If the DVD failed to autostart, you can load the menu manually by running the file called start.htm in the root directory using Windows Explorer.

VIRUSES
These DVDs are rigorously checked for viruses during production, however, PC PowerPlay can make no guarantees to this end. Next Media always recommends that the DVDs be scanned using your own anti-virus software on first and subsequent uses.

INSTALLING SOFTWARE
Simply click the install/download link under a file's description to launch the installation program. please ensure that all other programs are closed and that any anti-virus software is disabled before performing a software installation. Due to STEAM region locking, not all content may be available toutside Australia.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT
PC PowerPlay assumes the end-user of these DVDs has the necessary computer knowledge required to operate and install software from this product, and cannot provide technical support either for this or for any of the software contained on this disc.

DVD REPLACEMENTS
PC PowerPlay can only replace DVDs that were damaged or faulty at the time of purchase. If you think a DVD fits into one of these categories then please contact the DVD Producer immediately to assess whether a replacement needs to be sent out. email: dwilks@nextmedia.com.au

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Tech 269

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE

Meet the New Gang

Different from the Old Gang

This issue, the last of 2017 sees a new tech team step up to the plate for PCPP. Rather than talk them up again, we thought we'd let them introduce themselves (in third-person bio form).

Anthony Agius

Anthony Agius loves everything to do with technology, there's no area that doesn't fascinate him. You may know him as decryption on the Overclockers Australia forums or on various forms of social media. A former Mac, Windows and Linux systems administrator, he's always been knee deep in tech gear, looking to find the best bang for buck items out there. No piece of hardware is off limits for Anthony to pass judgement on. Once upon a time he ran a cryptocurrency mining farm in his shed that he naively decommissioned way before the price of Bitcoin skyrocketed and now has nothing to show for it. Anthony also publishes an email newsletter called The Sizzle, filled with tech news every afternoon and when not writing about technology, dreams about the North Melbourne Kangaroos winning an AFL Premiership.

Chris Szewczyk

Chris is a lifelong geek and started tinkering with his first PC at age 10. After leaving university with a hangover and little else, he began his career as a bricks and mortar PC salesman, fondly recalling many inventive attempts to claim refunds and witnessing exactly what cat hair can do to a PC.

He became a competitive overclocking addict, venturing into the use of phase change and liquid nitrogen cooling and spending a fortune in the process before realizing that baked beans and coke zero do not adequately cover the five food groups.

He's been writing about PC components on and off since 2010 and spent five years handling the technical marketing for a major PC component manufacturer in Australia.

He loves travel and bar hopping in far flung exotic locales. He's a Formula One tragic and is highly skilled at creating excuses to avoid family gatherings when the F1 is on.

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

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THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU
INTEL I7 7700K
intel.com.au

MOBO
ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO
asus.com.au

RAM
2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200
crucial.com

PSU
CORSAIR 850W PSU
corsair.com

COOLING
H105 CORSAIR COOLER
www.corsair.com.au

PCPP 2017 Gift Guide

Everyone likes presents. Here are presents!

LIVING ROOM

LG 4K OLED

www.lg.com ▪ From $4,000

As far as we're concerned this is the king of TVs. Yes, Samsung QLED serves up some dazzling brightness but only OLED does the infinitely deep contrast that, we think, makes absolutely everything you chuck up onto the screen melt your eyes with its beauty. LG leads the OLED field with the best value, too. You can pick up a 55inch 55B6T for just under four grand, which we readily admit is insane money for any TV, but in the world of OLED it's a dead set bargain. Other plusses – they barely sip electricity, viewing angles are ridiculous and it supports both kinds of HDR (HDR-10 and Dolby Vision). Sony also make nice OLEDs, but LG offers the best value at the moment.

QNAP 253B or SYNOLOGY DS216PLAY NAS

www.qnap.com $799 ▪ www.synology.com $500

While the WD My Cloud is a set and forget storer, those who like to fiddle and tinker and monitor things should look no further than a NAS from Qnap or Synology. These two companies make the best proper NASs around, so for storage addicts (there are such people), consider our two favourite NASs, being either the Qnap 253B or Synology DS216play. Both are lovely because besides great design and marvelous UIs, they are also red hot media players. Figuratively red hot, that is. Gift one to someone, fill it with every episode of every TV show ever, legally acquired of course, and spend the summer holidays streaming like a mad lad.

NETGEAR ORBI

From: $379 ▪ www.netgear.com.au/orbi

As anyone who lives in a house, or even a flat built before 1970, knows, not every room is going to have the same, or any for that matter, access to Wi-Fi. This is where the Orbi comes in. Unlike most Wi-Fi extenders that create a secondary network, potentially requiring different login requirements in different areas, the Orbi is instead built with range extension in mind, so each additional Orbi will only extend coverage, not create a new network. It's fast to boot and good for use with multiple simultaneous devices.

PHILIPS HUE

From $59 ▪ www2.meethue.com

There was once a time when a Wi-Fi enabled multi-hue LED lighting system seemed faintly ridiculous. That time was 1950, and anyone in their right mind would flip their lid for this in their home. Who wouldn't want to set their kid's room to be underwater blue, or have the bulb's colour and brightness gradually change through the day? Oh, you're having a home disco this Friday? There's an app for that. In fact, there are hundreds of apps and settings, it's crazy. Grab some bulbs and invite your friends over for "a bit of a giggle" under the "magic rainbow lights."

OPPO UDP-205

$2,199 ▪ www.oppodigital.com.au

You've got yourself a top of the line TV with some sweet 4K and HDR action, so now you need something to really take advantage of it. Sure, some streaming content has HDR and 4K, but unless you have a really good connection, 4K is out of the question. Enter Oppo, makers of the best BD players around. The UDP-205 is the apple of Wilks' eye and features support for multiple media formats, from SACD and DVD-Audio through 4K UHD and 3D, multiple DACs for 7.1 output and stereo, jitter reduction, a built-in headphone amp and more. If you shop around too, you can get one chipped to be multi-region.

ACER PREDATOR HELIOS 300

$1,999 ▪ www.acer.com

The Predator Helios 300 really hits that sweet spot for the three Ps you should look at when thinking about buying a gaming laptop – Performance, Price and Portability. This 15.6" laptop doesn't skimp on power thanks to the Core i7 7700HQ CPU, GTX 1060-6G and 16GB RAM, and doesn't cut other features to keep the price down. The screen is a full HD IPS LCD and for storage this little monster features both a 256GB SSD and 2TB HDD. All this fits in a pretty nifty looking metal chassis with a new air intake design, and weighs around 2.8Kg. Not bad all round.

NINTENDO SWITCH

$469 ▪ www.nintendo.com.au

Yes, this is a PC mag, but no, that doesn't mean you can't enjoy a console gaming session now and again. While the Switch is capable of transforming from a portable console to a TV console through the use of a proprietary dock, the handheld mode is what we'd recommend the Switch for. Play Skyrim on the bus, or LA Noire, or if you want a more Nintendo-centric experience, Breath of the Wild, Super Mario Odyssey or Xenoblade Chronicles 2. Don't let being part of the PC Master Race stop you from enjoying some truly great gaming experiences.

MSI VR ONE

From $3599 ▪ vr.msi.com/Backpacks/vrone

As you already know, VR is kind of expensive, but if you have the budget you can make it all kinds of special. Being tethered to a chair or by cable range seriously restricts what you can do with VR, but with the VR One you can get your VR on the go, with the only limit really being how long the hot-swappable batteries last. The VR One boasts either a GTX1060 or 1070, a core i7 processor, 16Gb RAM and weighs in at around 3.6Kg worn as a backpack. The rechargeable, hot-swappable batteries deliver around 1.5 hours of continuous VR play, which may not seem like much, but is plenty for roving VR time.

MICROSOFT MIXED REALITY VR/AR

$799 ▪ www.acer.com

The Vive and Rift have done much good, starting the VR scene and motivating developers to support VR. And now comes Microsoft, doing its thing to really popularise and most importantly – standardise – the platform. Just about every tech company has one, and the Acer shown left is a good example of how they are all largely the same, conforming to the MS set of standards. We like the Acer in particular because that lovely blue makes it razzle and dazzle. All Mixed Reality headsets have a resolution of 1440 x 1440 for each screen, and have forward facing cameras that support the AR function, as well as circumventing the need for separate position sensors. It's supported in Steam VR, which is the big thing, though we would argue that the flip up visor is in fact the biggest breakthrough in design over the Vive and Rift.

HTC VIVE

$999 ▪ www.vive.com/au/

There are arguments to be made for both of the main VR formats, but at the moment we veer towards the Vive as our favourite for a few reasons. The controllers come as standard so all Vive games make use of them, and the headset is more comfortable as a whole. Room scale out of the box is a nice value add, too. You still need a pretty chunky system to run VR well, or something like the MSI VR One backpack if you don't want to be tethered by wires, but if VR is your bag and you don't have the patience to see how the Microsoft Mixed Reality headsets are going to shake up the market, the Vive is the way to go.

XBOX ONE X/PS4 PRO

$649/$529 ▪ www.xbox.com/www.playstation.com

As we said with the Switch, give consoles a chance. The choice between the Xbox One X and PS4 Pro will ultimately come down to exclusives and which are more appealing. For the most part we think the PS4 Pro has the better back catalogue with games like Horizon: Zero Dawn, Yakuza 0 and Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, as well as some really promising 2018 exclusives, whereas the Xbox One X has the potential of cross-purchasing through the Microsoft store so you get games for PC and Xbox when you purchase them. The slate of games ain't shabby either. Both consoles can output games at 4K or in HDR, so there's that too.

CONTROLLER

$Varies ▪ URL: Varies

The type of controller you prefer is totally subjective, but every PC gamer needs at least one nowadays. If you're happy with just basic plug and play compatibility as well as familiarity, both PS4 and Xbox One controllers work with the PC, or if you don't have a console, the offerings from Razer and Steelseries are both good. If you're looking for something a bit more specialised and customisable (not to mention expensive), you could look at something from Scuff or an Xbox Elite controller. If you want something even more tailored, take a look at what is available through the company Evil Controllers. You choose a base design and go from there with programmable buttons, paddles, interchangeable side grips and even custom modded circuit boards if you're so inclined.

GAMES/MEDIA ROOM

AOC AG352UCG AGON MONITOR

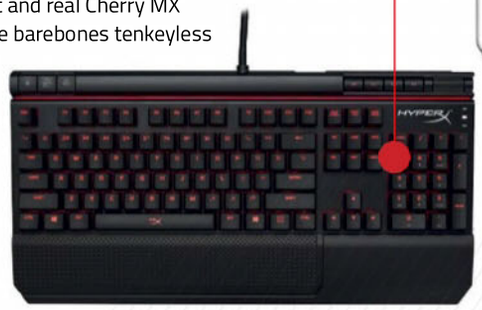
$1,249 ▪ www.aoc.com

The name isn't exactly the sexiest out there and $1249 is quite a bit of money to slap down for a monitor, but the price ultimately goes to show how quickly the price of premium monitors is falling. For your grand and a quarter you get 35" of 21:9, 4K, curved love. That's 3440x1440p, so the vertical resolution is high enough to make the width of the screen not feel awkward in games. On top of that the screen boasts a 100MHz refresh, 4ms GtG, G-Sync and a USB 3 hub. It doesn't do HDR, but for that you'll have to pay a hell of a lot more at the moment. We all want one.

HYPERX ALLOY ELITE/ALLOY PRO

$149 (Elite), $129 (Pro) ▪ www.hyperxgaming.com

In the span of a few short years, HyperX has gone from the experimental peripheral arm of Kingston to one of the best peripheral manufacturers around. The Alloy Elite and Alloy Pro are two of their flagship keyboards and are both a pleasure to use. The Elite has all the bells and whistles – built-in AV keys, a large wrist rest and real Cherry MX switches, whereas the Pro is a more barebones tenkeyless design, perfect for limited desk space. Yes, they are technically gaming keyboards but that doesn't mean they're garish and covered in coloured lights. Both keyboards are designed for performance and comfort rather than flash, so the only backlighting is a subdued red.



STORAGE

$Varies ▪ URL: Varies

Everyone can do with more storage, for pretty much every device they own, whether it be a new fast SSD like the Samsung 960 (Pro or Evo) for a game drive, or mass internal storage for a media PC, like the Seagate Barracuda Pro 12TB drive, or external storage to keep your files safe, like a WD My Book external drive with password protection. On the console front you need storage as well. WD/Sandisk has teamed with Nintendo to offer official 64GB and 128GB Nintendo Switch memory cards, Seagate has released the 8TB Game Drive Hub for Xbox One as well as continues to support their 2TB and 4TB Game Drives for PS4.

LOGITECH POWERPLAY MOUSEPAD and G703 LIGHTSPEED MOUSE

$179/$149 ▪ www.logitech.com/en-au/

For the longest time we have been champions of wired peripherals due to the frustration of dying batteries, lag and large charging stations, but we're definitely coming around.

$179 is quite a bit to charge for a mousepad, but we love it. The pad serves as a wireless charging station, so your mouse never needs charging, and the Lightspeed technology in the mouse delivers lag free mousing as good as we've seen. It's an excellent mouse to boot. It may be an investment in the short term, but the mixture of performance and convenience is worth it.

HYPERX CLOUD ALPHA

$169 ▪ www.hyperxgaming.com

If you have multiple formats you play on – PC, console, handheld and mobile – it's better to have one headset compatible with all of the formats rather than having to get specialty gear for each. For our money the HyperX Cloud Alpha is the best bang for your buck when it comes to compatibility and performance. The headset sounds fantastic, delivering some of the best stereo we've heard outside of far more expensive headsets and the audio jack means they can be plugged into anything.

SEARZALL

Attachment $120, Trigger $50, Propane Torch $40 ▪ www.amazon.com

Once you've perfectly cooked your steak, chicken, pork or other protein *sous vide*, the best way to finish and get a nice crust is to use fire. Some people may be lucky enough to have a barbecue handy, but for everyone else there's the Searzall, an attachment for a propane torch that diffuses the flame slightly making it more controllable and makes for a more even burn eliminating any propane smell or flavour. They're not exactly cheap, but after you've seared your first steak, you'll be looking for excuses to use it from then on.

ALIEN OVOMORPH EGG COOKIE JAR

$39.99 USD ▪ www.thinkgeek.com

Ridley Scott may have gone off the rails with repeated attempts to ruin his own franchise with unnecessary sequels starring a cast of characters too stupid to survive crossing the road let along fighting space monsters, but there are still some good things to come from the Alien movies. This is an officially licensed piece of Alien merchandise. Let that sink in. Then enjoy the idea of showing someone Alien/Aliens for the first time and then offering them a biscuit.

KITCHEN

INDUCTION HOTPLATE

From $49 ▪ URL: varies

If you've ever lived in a rental property, you'll know the pain of trying to cook something on a cheap cooktop. Half won't let you get a pan hot enough to brown meat, and the other half have no fine control, so you either get all the heat or nothing. An induction hotplate uses magnetic induction to heat a pan. Most cheaper models feature nine or so preset temperature levels as well as some preprogrammed settings for individual dishes, but the more you pay the more fine control you can get. If you're willing to stump up around $1000 you can get single degree incremental temperature control.

IMMERSION CIRCULATOR

From $149 ▪ www.anovaculinary.com

There are many brands of immersion circulator around, but Wilks swears by Anova, so let's start with that. Sometimes referred to as portable *sous vide* machines, immersion circulators are used to hold a pot of water at a certain temperature allowing for cheap and easy home *sous vide* cooking. Imagine always being able to cook a steak rare, keep fish moist and flaky, or cook the tenderest brisket you've ever had. That's what *sous vide* does – hold food at a temperature that ensures consistency and doneness without guesswork or heat shock.

AEROPRESS

From $39 ▪ www.alternativebrewing.com.au

You can spend all the money in the world getting a killer espresso machine, but if you're only making a cup at a time, the simple, muscle powered Aeropress makes one of the best coffees you'll ever have, provided the grind is right and you're consistent with your press. As an added bit of awesomeness, anyone old enough may remember the Aerobie Flying Disc, a Frisbee that could fly an incredible distance. The Aeropress and Aerobie were invented by the same mad genius.

SAMSUNG T5 SSD

From $195 ▪ www.samsung.com.au

Regular old USB sticks are so passé. Gift one to anyone and they'll look at you like you don't love them. Who wants that? Not us! Not you! So instead wrap up a spanky Samsung T5 in some glitter paper and leave it under the tree, and when the lucky someone tears it open at 6am – and not a minute before – they'll be flush with delight as they simultaneously imagine how quickly their data will transfer thanks to proper SSD technology, and the green looks of envy from their mates when they drop this onto the café table next to your cousin's Porsche keyring.

OUT & ABOUT

NERF N-STRIKE ELITE DEMOLISHER

$79.95 ▪ www.hasbro.com

Going outside is a scary prospect, so you'd better go armed. While we don't overtly advocate violence, sometimes the only solution to a problem is firepower, and the Nerf Demolisher has firepower to spare, whether you're facing down hordes of the shambling dead in Zedtown, or you simply want to shoot your mate in the face without the possibility of going to gaol. This two-in-one weapon is a rapid firing semi-auto with a 10-round banana clip with an underslung Nerf grenade launcher.

FLYBRIX

Flybrix.com ▪ From $149 USD

Flybrix isn't an official Lego partner nor are they sanctioned by Lego, but even so, the build-your-own drone with Lego concept behind Flybrix is one of the best things we've seen done with the snap-together blocks in years. The drones are controlled either via an app or with a dedicated controller (if you fork out for one of the more expensive packs) and function, but most importantly, they are fully modular. There is no glue or solder required to make one of the drones, just the willingness to get elbow deep in Lego bits. They're also designed to break harmlessly into pieces in the event of a crash as well, so don't be too alarmed to see an minifig or rotor blade fly past.

PLANTRONICS BACKBEAT PRO 2

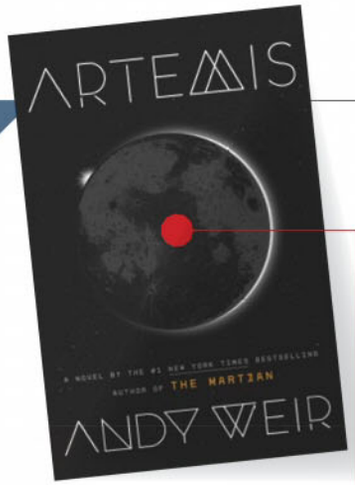
$249 ▪ www.plantronics.com

Whether you use a dedicated music player or just use your phone for tunes, you need a good set of headphones. These wireless noise-cancelling headphones aren't quite as good as the leaders in the field – the mighty Bose Quiet Comfort 35 or Sony 1000X – but for around $200 less, the Backbeats are more than worth the money. They're fantastically built, can be used both wired and wireless, the noise cancelling is excellent, they're comfortable and most importantly of all, they have excellent sound quality.

AMPL SMART BAG

$499 USD ▪ ampl.wpengine.com

The AMPL smart bag is by no means cheap, but if you're a technophile lost without having at least a phone and laptop or handheld console with you at all times, you know how important having access to some kind of backup battery or charging station is. The Smart Bag features three sizes of rechargeable batteries for any purpose, as well as six USB ports for charging. Technically the AMPL Smart Bag isn't available as yet, but you can "reserve" a bag right now, and given the fact that the backpack will be valued as $679 on launch, jumping the gun and reserving one right now definitely sounds like the way to go.



ARTEMIS by ANDY WEIR

$32.99 ▪ www.qdb.com.au

Andy Weir writes exhaustively researched science fiction. His first novel, The Martian, was a huge hit and best-seller in print and went on to be a huge critical hit and box office smash when made into a movie. Artemis, his followup novel, has taken years of research but it's worth it. Jazz Bashara is a criminal. She lives in Artemis, the first and only city on the moon. How do you pull off the perfect heist when the city you live in needs to be constantly monitored and maintained to make sure none of the systems required for life fail?

GALAXY CLASS LCARS KEYCAPS

$109 ▪ shop.roddenberry.com/

Wilks is a keyboard fetishist and Hollingworth is a massive Star Trek fan, so both of them are more than a little keen on these custom keycaps from Roddenberry Entertainment. For those not fully Trek savvy, LCARS (Library Computer Access/Retrieval System) is the fictional operating system used in Star Trek: The Next Generation and beyond. The keycaps mimic the look and colour of the LCARS OS, but if you want to go a step further for the Trekker in your life, you can also get an LCARS interface skin for Windows 10 or 8.1 through the Microsoft store.

DROPMIX

$199.95 ▪ www.dropmix.com

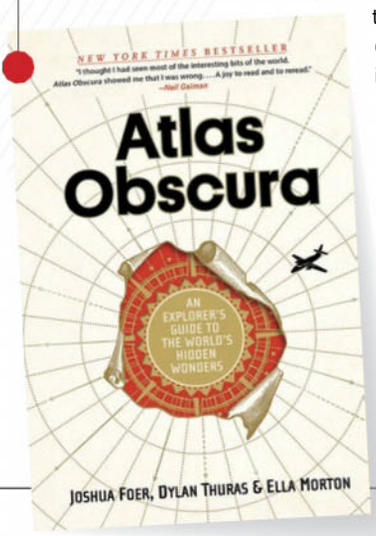
Harmonix has been making revolutionary music games from the turn of the century, with titles like Frequency, Guitar Hero and Rock Band, but Dropmix is quite unlike anything the developer has made before. Instead of a console game, Dropmix is a based around cards, a game board and a tablet/phone app. Each card features a sample from a famous song and is coloured corresponding to the place on the board it can be put (percussion, rhythm, lead and vocals). When placed on the board the samples play in a loop through the tablet/phone. Depending on the game mode you can just freely mix songs, play against another player in something like musical UNO, or play cooperatively. It's pretty rad. Who would have thought that The Final Countdown vocals would match so well with Down with the Sickness percussion and Bangarang lead when downtempoed to 92 BPM?

MISCELLANEOUS

ATLAS OBSCURA

$34.75 ▪ www.booktopia.com.au

When there are so many fantastic places to explore in games, it's sometimes easy to become a little jaded with the real world. The Atlas Obscura is an atlas of 600 strange, magical or just downright amazing, like the glowworm caves of New Zealand, the Gates of Hell in Turkmenistan, a South African pub inside a giant baobob tree or the stromatolites of Hamlin Pool right here in Australia. It's an endlessly fascinating book that reads a little like a fantasy travelogue but with the added bonus of actually being in the real world. Even a hermit like Wilks wants to go to some of these places – but we're not sure why the first one on his list is the Museum of Human Disease.


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
Atlas Obscura
AN EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S HIDDEN WONDERS
JOSHUA FOER, DYLAN THURAS & ELLA MORTON

CHEWBACCA STUBBIE HOLDER

$18 ▪ www.zingpopculture.com.au

Show your geek pride and Australian pride at the same time by sticking your tinnie of choice (we're quite partial to Brewdog's Elvis Juice, a grapefruit infused American style IPA) inside a Chewbacca themed stubbie holder. Hell, even if you don't like Star Wars the gift works – you can just imagine how many Wookies had to die to make all these furry beer cosies.

LEGO MILLENNIUM FALCON

$1,299.99 ▪ shop.lego.com/en-au/

Like Star Wars and Lego? Trick question. If the answer is no to either then you're probably an undercover narc looking to close the party down. If you answered yes to both questions you're obviously a person of refinement and taste. Individually Star Wars and Lego are good, but combine the two and you get magic. The Falcon ain't cheap, but it is a 7,500 piece model with four minifigs from the original trilogy (Han, Leia, Chewie and C-3PO), three from the new episodes (Old Han, Finn and Rey), as well as BB-8, two buildable Porgs and a buildable Mynock. We all want one.

GOODIES

REIZE SUBSCRIPTION

From $7/month ▪ Reize.com.au

Reize is an Australian powdered energy drink available through a subscription service. That's right – some bright sparks have realised that there is a market for energy drinks to be delivered right to your door. To be honest, the flavour isn't the best – Reize tastes a little like too sweet apple juice, but then again, nobody drinks energy drinks for the flavour. Each sachet contains 50mg of caffeine, so a single shot is good for a pick-me-up. If you want as much caffeine as a Monster or something similar, it's three sachets for you.

JUSTICE LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL OMNIBUS VOL. 1

$111.50 ▪ www.booktopia.com.au

With the exception of Wonder Woman and the post-Snyder Justice League, everything in the DC cinematic universe is pretty damn grim. Harken back to a time when DC was fun with the Justice League International Omnibus, a collection of the '80s JLI run by Keith Giffen and J.M DeMatteis in which a new look JLI that included Black Canary, Guy Gardner (the worst haircut in the superhero realm), Martian Manhunter, Doctor Light, Blue Beetle and more, fighting for the fate of the world, against each other and making jokes the whole time.

STAR TREK ADVENTURES BORG CUBE COLLECTOR'S EDITION BOXED SET

$677.99 ▪ www.modiphius.net

While not as well known a brand as Wizards of the Coast (D&D) or Paizo (Pathfinder), Modiphius is still one of the big players in the tabletop roleplaying scene, with games such as Achtung! Cthulhu, Conan, Coriolis, Fate and Savage Worlds published under the banner. Star Trek Adventures is the first official Star Trek RPG in a decade and is based around Modiphius' own, elegant, 2d20 system. You can get the core book in PDF for $20, but why settle for a PDF when for only $650 more you can get every physical and PDF book currently available, dice sets, a bunch of neat minis and a fold-out GM screen all presented in a huge Borg cube?

BLACKSMITHING LESSONS

$ Varies ▪ URL: Varies

The art of hitting hot metal with a hammer has come back into mainstream culture of late, so why not discover the joys of making something deadly using potentially deadly tools for yourself? Looking for a new career that allows you to wear a leather apron and grow a massive beard? Like extremely hot fires? Forges around Australia offer single day, weekend and longer courses in the fundamentals of forging, knife-making, tool-making, Damascus forging, power-hammer usage and more. Some forges offer "passports" to use the forges unguided after enough introductory courses are completed.

GPU

Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070 Ti Founders Edition

An oldie but goodie

PRICE $749
www.nvidia.com

Nvidia's Pascal generation of graphics cards have proven to be a hit. Over the last 18 months we've seen the entire range bring great gaming performance, low power consumption and excellent thermal characteristics to their respective market segments. Here we are 18 months later with perhaps the last GTX 10 series card we'll see in the form of the GTX 1070 Ti. It's designed to sit between the GTX 1070 and GTX 1080 price and performance levels and is obviously a strategic release aimed at combatting the recently released AMD Radeon Vega 56.

PLUGGING A GAP

The GTX 1070 Ti is the third iteration of the venerable GP104 GPU. The GP104-300-A1 found in the 1070 Ti offers a bump in clock speeds and core count over the 1070 but does miss out on the 25% faster GDDR5X memory of the 1080. According to the specifications, on paper the 1070 Ti should be closer in performance to the 1080 than it is to the 1070. In fact other than the memory bandwidth it is quite surprising just how close in spec the 1070 Ti is to the 1080. Obviously Nvidia did not want to give the AMD Vega 56 a sniff of its market share and went down the path of releasing a new GPU rather than the other option of lowering the price of the GTX 1070. Business is business.

The GTX 1070 Ti Founders Edition design and cooling is identical to its GP104 series siblings. The PCB design is similar to the GTX 1080 FE with a five-phase power design offering some OC headroom. Power comes via a single 8 pin power connector. The familiar copper vapour chamber cooler is capable of cooling the more powerful 250w Titan X and 1080 Ti cards, so it is easily capable of cooling the GTX 1070 Ti with its 180w power consumption. This directly leads to a quieter card, with our test sample barely able to be detected over the sound of our CPU cooling. You can expect partner cards to produce even lower noise levels if other custom GP104 cards are any indicator.

The 1070 Ti carries all the key Nvidia features we've come to expect. Of course there's G-Sync and SLI support in addition to well-established software features including ShadowPlay and Ansel. We have three DisplayPort connectors that officially support the 1.2 standard, with DP 1.3 and 1.4 listed as 'ready'. There's also one HDMI 2.0b connector and one dual-link DVI connector. This means all the latest video standards are covered. You can even run a 8K display at 60Hz for a bit of future proofing.

> "leads to a quieter card, with our test sample barely able to be detected over the sound of our CPU cooling"

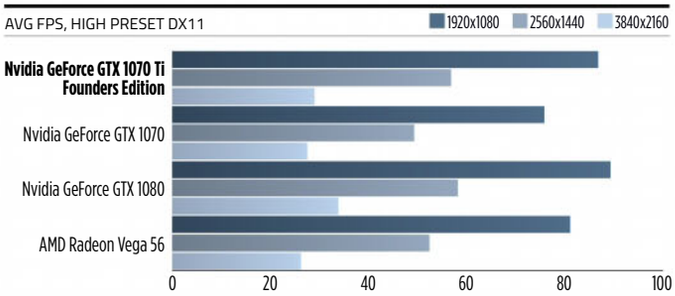
DELIVERS EXACTLY WHAT WE EXPECT

With Pascal generation GPUs being well known and established for a year and a half, we don't see any surprises when we look at the relative performance of the 1070 Ti. It's bang on where we'd expect it to be, roughly mid-way between the 1070 and the 1080. As you can see in our benchmark results, the 1070 Ti is ideally suited to 2560x1440 screens where it generally sits around the key 60fps level in demanding games with high settings and AA levels. If you prefer to dial back the quality a bit in the quest for higher FPS with capable monitors, of course the 1070 Ti will easily run in the 100fps+ range on most games at 1440p.

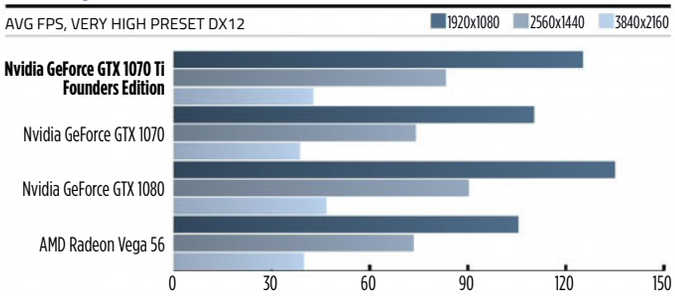
Temperature analysis is particularly important with Pascal GPUs due to the

GTX 1070 Ti benchmarks

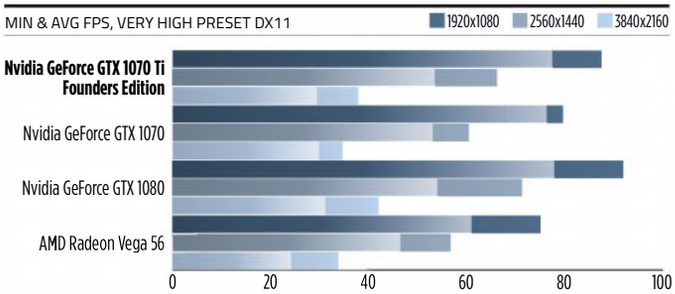
Total War - Warhammer II



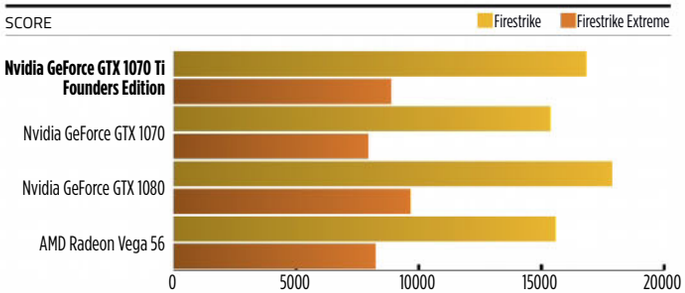
Rise of The Tomb Raider



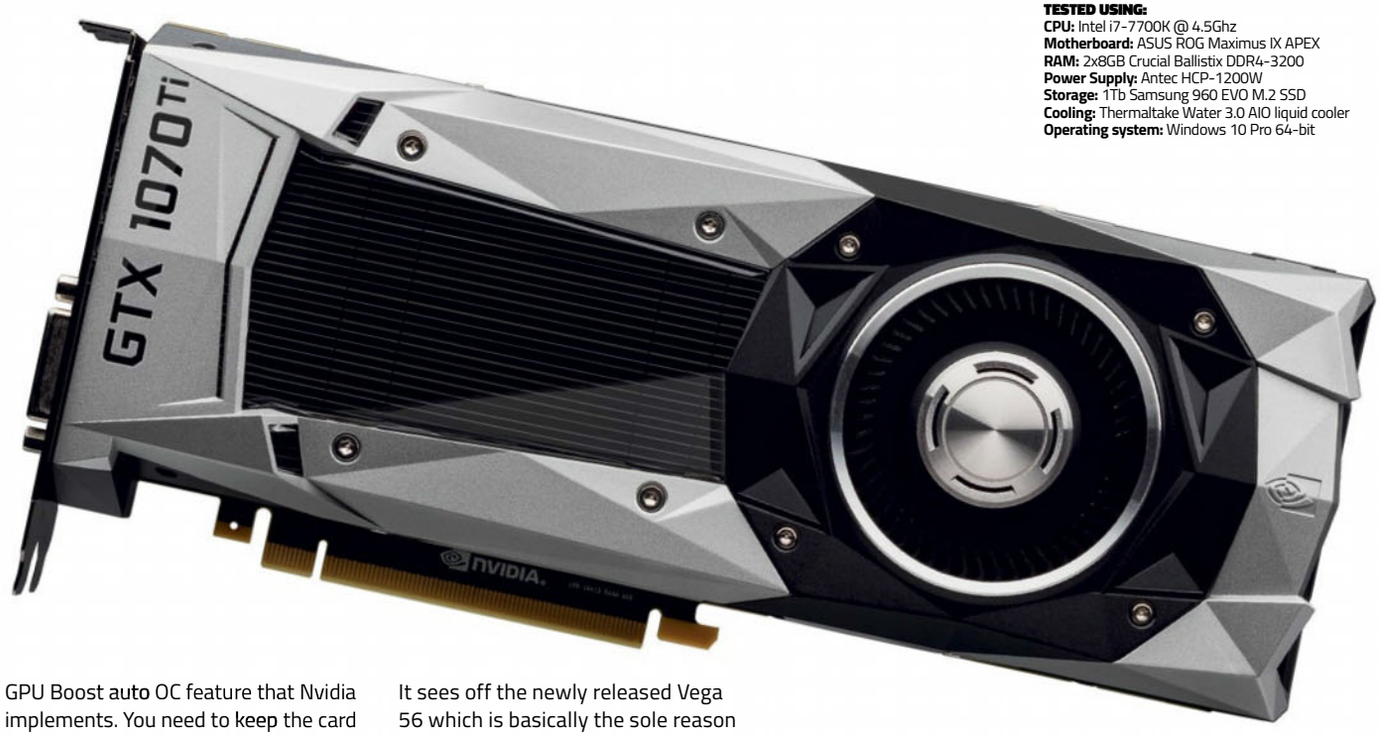
Ghost Recon Wildlands



3DMark



TESTED USING:
CPU: Intel i7-7700K @ 4.5Ghz
Motherboard: ASUS ROG Maximus IX APEX
RAM: 2x8GB Crucial Ballistix DDR4-3200
Power Supply: Antec HCP-1200W
Storage: 1Tb Samsung 960 EVO M.2 SSD
Cooling: Thermaltake Water 3.0 AIO liquid cooler
Operating system: Windows 10 Pro 64-bit



GPU Boost auto OC feature that Nvidia implements. You need to keep the card relatively cool to maximise the boost clock, and keep performance at its best. The highest temperature we saw was 80c. Beyond this temperature is where the cooler starts to ramp up. 80c gave us a mostly constant 1835 MHz GPU clock. Impressive.

The Nvidia GTX 1070 Ti Founders Edition delivers exactly what we expect from a card that's similar to the established GTX 1070 and 1080. It sees off the newly released Vega 56 which is basically the sole reason for its existence. The 1070 Ti FE is a very good card, and cannot be seen as a bad purchase, but at this stage in the high end GPU lifecycle what we really want is a new generation GeForce series to blow our minds like the first products did back in May 2016. Until that time comes, the GTX 1070 Ti is a good buy if you are in the market for a performance GPU and is recommended. *CHRIS SZEWCZYK*

+
- Closer to the 1080 than the 1070
- Power efficient
- Surprisingly efficient cooling

-
- Doesn't really add anything we didn't have a year and a half ago
- We wish it was a bit cheaper

VERDICT:

It's a good card, but there's nothing really new about it and it's 18 months after the launch of the 1080 and 1070.

8

GPU

Asus ROG Strix RX Vega 64

Vega burning brightly

PRICE $1139
www.asus.com.au

AMD themselves hyped up their Vega GPU to the point where it was anticipated as being a GTX 1080 Ti killer. Sadly this was not the case, and the reference card underwhelmed. Still, when looking at the underlying architecture, Vega has much to offer, particularly now that we are seeing the first custom models arrive that address the biggest weakness: cooling.

We are keen to see what Vega is really capable of with the Asus ROG Strix RX Vega 64.

VEGA DONE RIGHT

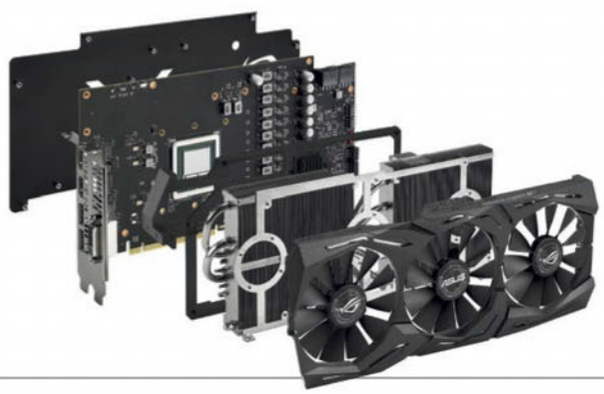
At first glance, you get the impression that this is a serious graphics card. It's effectively a triple slot design so consideration is needed when choosing accompanying components. Asus have improved on the reference card in every way. Gone is the overburdened reference blower cooler. The Asus Strix is cooler and quieter thanks to its triple dust resistant fan implementation, much larger fin surface area and lapped base for maximum contact. The fans don't spin until GPU hits 55c, leaving the card completely silent when not under heavy load. Cooling is only a part of it though. The PCB is massively improved over the reference card, with a 12 phase power delivery system fed by dual 8 pin power connectors. Frankly it is needed in order to cope with any meaningful overclocking.

Of course it wouldn't be a gamer oriented product without RGBs onboard, and Asus has included RGB lighting on the back plate and on the shroud of the card. There's also a supplemental RGB header that supports Asus Aura Sync for matching the colours to the rest of the system. The card has a total of five video outputs consisting of two DP v1.4, two HDMI 2.0b and one DVI-D port. This means all bases are covered with the latest video capabilities. One of the little things we really like is the inclusion of a pair of fan headers that can synchronise with the card for optimal cooling. For example, an adjacent case fan can ramp up to push additional air towards the card while under heavy load. The Asus GPU Tweak software has been updated with easy to set OC profiles in addition to full manual control for the more advanced tweaker.

Performance is pretty good and it trades blows with the GTX 1080, which is good to see, but that's the minimum we'd expect given the GTX 1080 has been around for 18 months and uses much less power. Perhaps AMD can find some performance gains over the life of the card, in DirectX 12 or Vulkan games that can make full use of the Vega feature set.

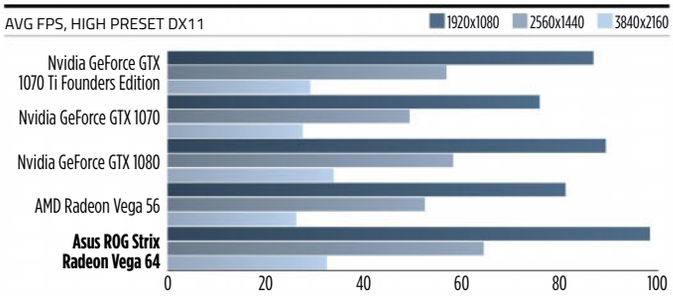
> "increasing power levels and setting a higher core clock leads to throttling quite quickly"

In our testing the card got up to 83c, which is high but not horrible. Thankfully noise levels are well under control. The huge Strix cooler does a great job. Unfortunately you can pretty much forget about overclocking. Increasing the power levels and setting a higher core clock leads to throttling quite quickly which defeats the purpose.



Strix RX Vega 64 benchmarks

Total War - Warhammer II



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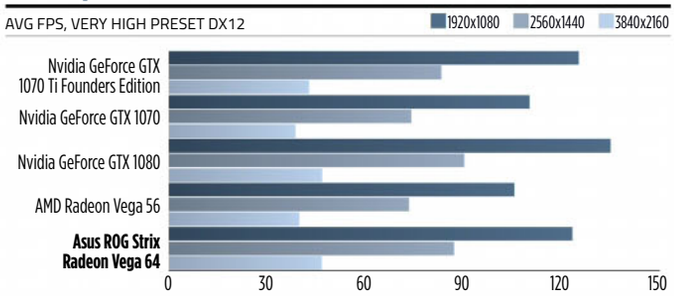

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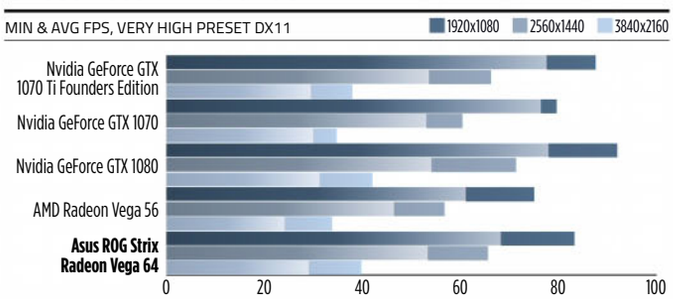

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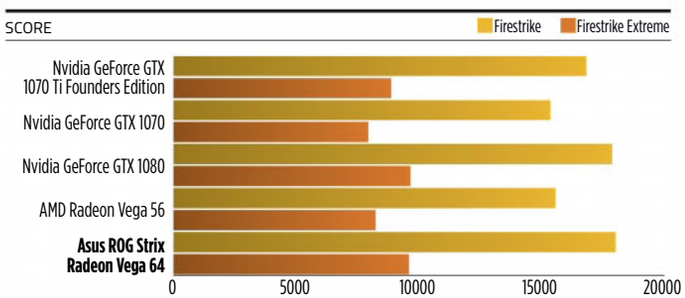

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Storage: 1Tb Samsung 960 EVO M.2 SSD
Cooling: Thermaltake Water 3.0 AIO liquid cooler
Operating system: Windows 10 Pro 64-bit

THAT POWER USAGE THOUGH...

At the end of the day there's a lot to like about the Vega architecture and its advanced features. Asus have done the best they could with what it is. If you have a Freesync monitor or just love team red, then the Asus Strix Vega 64 will serve you well. It competes well against the GTX 1080 but a 300 watt+ power consumption is tough to overlook.

One of the enduring problems for AMD is availability due to the mining craze. When you combine this with the scarcity of the HBM2 memory, we are looking at potential stock shortages and vastly inflated prices. This makes the card much more difficult to recommend. Asus have indicated the launch RRP will be $1139. At this price the GTX 1080 is clearly the superior choice. We are hopeful that street prices will be lower to make the Asus ROG Strix Vega 64 a more compelling option. *CHRIS SZEWCZYK* PC

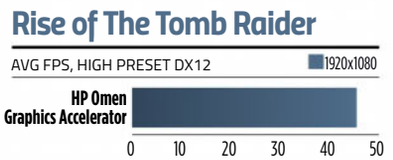
+
- Trades blows with the GTX 1080
- Superior to the reference Vega 64
- Excellent build quality

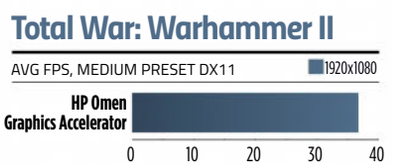
-
- Power consumption is too high
- Price and availability concerns

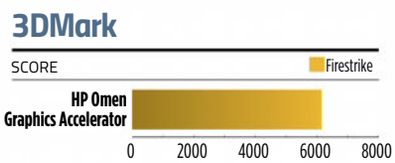
VERDICT:

Asus have done their best. The RX 64 is sort-of-cool, quiet and about as fast as you'll get from an air cooled Vega.

7







TEST LAPTOP:
HP EliteBook x360 G2
CPU: Intel i7-7600U ▪ **RAM:** 16Gb
Operating system: Windows 10 Pro 64-bit

GPU

HP Omen Graphics Accelerator

Engage primary thruster

PRICE $998
www.hp.com.au

External video cards have been teased for several years, but technical limitations have stalled their mainstream adoption. More and more users express the desire to take a lightweight notebook with its all day battery life and carry it to work or around the campus and then bring it home, plug it into an external dock and have the grunt to play your favourite PC games. Thanks to Thunderbolt 3 and the bandwidth it provides, we are finally at the stage where external GPU enclosures are making sense. Enter the HP Omen Graphics Accelerator.

The HP Omen Accelerator features a physically big and bold design that really stands out on your desk. There are three versions available. There's the entry level unit with no GPU or storage included, then there's a version with a GTX 1060 3GB and a 1Tb hard drive, while the highest end model adds a GTX 1070. We have the mid spec model on hand. It's all powered by a 500w 80Plus Bronze ATX PSU which is pretty basic for a machine such as this. The 1Tb HDD can be used to store anything including games that would otherwise not fit onto a typically small laptop SSD. There's an extensive range of ports including gigabit LAN, four USB 3.0 Type-A ports and a USB 3.1 Type-C port. All in all the Accelerator brings pretty good additional functionality. Importantly, your laptop will be charged while it is plugged into the Accelerator.

The unit is user upgradeable much like a regular desktop. Do you need a larger HDD or SSD? Check. Do you fancy a next generation GPU? No problem. Setup is as simple as connecting your laptop via a single Thunderbolt 3 cable and running through the automatic setup. Add the GPU driver and you're good to go.

And now the big question; how does it perform? We ran a set of gaming benchmarks and found that the GTX 1060 3GB equipped Omen Accelerator is capable of genuine 1080p gaming, though it does come with compromises vs a desktop system. We tested with a HP EliteBook x360 with an i7-7600U dual core CPU. This is a fast laptop CPU, but obviously it cannot compete with a faster desktop CPU, so there will naturally be some performance penalty. This, in combination with software ecosystem immaturity, bandwidth limitations, and overhead means that performance is compromised. Don't be too concerned about that though. The level of performance on offer absolutely destroys integrated graphics and, when viewed this way, we can't really complain. The GTX 1060 equipped Omen Accelerator will deliver 1080p gameplay with any modern title which at the end of the day is the goal of the unit. You'll get better performance from a dedicated gaming laptop, but they come with their own compromises.

> "the level of performance absolutely destroys integrated graphics"

External GPUs are still a nascent technology. HP have done a good job with the Omen Accelerator though if you're a serious gamer, there's no substitute for a desktop. The gap is narrowing quickly though.

CHRIS SZEWCZYK PC

+
- Easy setup
- User upgradeable

-
- Needs a high spec CPU to match
- A bit pricey

VERDICT:

The HP Omen Accelerator combines capable, but not earth shattering gaming performance into a well featured and user upgradeable design.

7

WI-FI

Linksys WRT32X AC3200 Dual-Band Wi-Fi Gaming Router

Top shelf performance, but only on Killer-enabled PCs

PRICE $449
linksys.com/au

High pings are awful and can easily ruin a fast-paced online game. Not only do you get killed because you can't react in time, but you look like an idiot getting shot in the back. Unfortunately, running an Ethernet cable to your router isn't always an option, so Linksys has teamed up with Killer to create the WRT32X router which attempts to bridge the performance gap between Wi-Fi and Ethernet.

Let's get right into it and discuss the Killer Prioritization Engine (KPE) as that's the whole point of this router. If you don't care about that, the Linksys WRT1900AC virtually is the same unit but cheaper, so this killer feature (get it?) better deliver the goods.

To take advantage of the KPE you need a computer with the Killer Wireless-AC 1535 or 1435 Wi-Fi card. If you don't have one, the KPE doesn't do anything beyond basic QoS, common on many mid-range routers. But, if you are lucky enough to have a computer with a compatible Killer Wi-Fi card and have the Killer Control Centre software installed, your computer and the WRT32X will automatically detect each other.

Enable KPE in the settings and that's all there is to it. Once enabled, everything is automatically configured to ensure the computer with the Killer Wi-Fi card gets priority over all other traffic. Unfortunately, that's all it does. There's no magic bullet that brings latency down to single digits, the laws of physics still apply to the WRT32X's radios.

The other features it does have, however, are easy to set up. There's the ability to set up a guest network for anyone visiting, but doesn't need access to your entire network. Basic port forwarding and uPnP are there for gaming servers or BitTorrent clients. Static IP reservations, dynamic DNS, SMB & FTP file sharing off an external HDD plugged in to the USB 3.0 and a nifty option to disable all the flashing lights round out the features package.

The best feature is probably the inclusion of a OpenVPN client that's a piece of cake to set up. Most VPN services commonly used to avoid geoblocks or protect privacy support OpenVPN, so by including it on the router (which isn't a common feature, most are L2TP/IPSec clients, which most cloud based VPN services don't support), your entire network can be enjoy the benefits of a VPN and you don't need to install any software on your computer. Simply download the OPVN configuration file from your VPN provider, upload it to the WRT32X via the administration page and you're done. Kudos for Linksys for making this such a painless process.

Deciding to buy the Linksys WRT32X is simple. Do you have a laptop with a Killer Wi-Fi card? No? Don't buy it. If you do have a Killer Wi-Fi card in your rig, do you really hate changing settings on your router to enable QoS? Yes? Then buy the WRT32X, you'll love it. The admin interface is super easy to use, the 4x4 802.11ac radio is cutting edge and it's one of the least gaudy looking "gaming" routers on the market.
ANTHONY AGIUS PC

+
- Auto QoS with Killer Wi-Fi cards
- Excellent interface
- OpenVPN client

-
- Needs a Killer enabled PC

VERDICT:
If you have a Killer Wi-Fi card installed and don't want to have to change router settings for QoS, this is the router for you.

7

DISPLAY

Asus ROG Swift PG27VQ Curved Gaming Monitor

165Hz refresh rate plus 1ms latency equals the smoothest gaming monitor around

PRICE $1199
asus.com/au

The Asus ROG Swift PG27VQ is, on paper, the perfect match for a fast GPU that spits out hundreds of frames per second at 1440p in your favourite games. But what's it like in practice?

Inside is a TN panel that supports a 1ms response time for virtually lag free gaming. TN panels aren't as nice to look at as an IPS panel, but if you want low response times, TN is the only way to go. To Asus's credit, they've made a nice-looking TN panel, but the colour gamut is average, with only 72% of the NTSC colour space.

If you plan going multi-display, three of these units make a nice panoramic scene thanks to the gentle 1800R curvature and slim 8mm bezel. When placed together, they're ideal for racing simulators or cockpit-views in flight simulators. To make aligning your multi-monitor setup easy, there's a built-in alignment feature which adds guidelines to the edges of the display.

Overlays are activated by pressing a dedicated GamePlus button on the rear of the PG27VQ. Crosshair mode adds a persistent crosshair in the middle of the screen for pinpoint accuracy in first-person shooters. An on-screen timer lets you know how long until the next respawn, or simply how long you've been playing.

The PG27VQ supports Nvidia's G-Sync system to remove annoying blur, stuttering and screen tearing you experience when the frame rate of the video doesn't match the monitor's refresh rate. G-Sync adapts the monitor's refresh rate automatically to match your game's frame rate and the result is buttery smooth gaming that looks amazing. For games without G-Sync built in, there's also ULMB (Ultra Low Motion Blur) support.

Another feather in the PG27VQ's cap is Nvidia 3D Vision support. With optional stereoscopic glasses, movies and photos can be seen in 3D, at up to 120Hz. If you're an AMD graphics card owner, none of this fancy stuff works, so you should investigate another monitor for your setup.

The PG27VQ is the first monitor to be included in the Aura Sync family, with four lighting zones, including ambient lighting behind the monitor. The stand is fully adjustable, allowing modification of the angle, swivel and height of the display. There's a common 100mm x 100mm VESA amount on the rear for use on any standard monitor arm or wall mount.

Connectivity wise, there's all the ports you need, with HDMI 1.4, DisplayPort 1.2, a 3.5mm audio socket for headphones and two USB 3.0 ports. The PG27VQ uses an external power supply, which is great as the power supply in monitors is often the first thing to crap out.

> if you're an AMD owner, none of this fancy stuff works, so you should investigate another monitor

All up, if you've got rig with an Nvidia card capable of high frame rates, you won't be disappointed. 1ms response times will be appreciated by all and support for Nvidia's 3D vision is just the icing on the cake. For those already invested in the Asus ROG and Aura Sync system, the ROG Swift PG27VQ is a must buy. *ANTHONY AGIUS* PC

+
- 1ms response time
- Heaps of connectivity
- 165Hz

-
- Expensive
- Aura Sync adds price not performance

VERDICT:
If you're into high framerates, Nvidia cards and Aura Sync, look no further.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD **9**

DISPLAY

Asus ROG Strix XG27VQ Curved Gaming Monitor

1080p AMD gamers that need high frame rate support will love this monitor

PRICE $599
asus.com/au

1080p gaming may be overshadowed by 4K, but it's still the sweet spot for gamers who prefer smooth motion over high resolutions. The Asus ROG Strix XG27VQ aims to be one of the smoothest 1080p monitors around with support for 144Hz refresh rates and AMD's FreeSync.

At the centre of the XG27VQ is a 1080p VA type panel with a 3000:1 contrast ratio. VA panels aren't as responsive or fast as a TN panel, but have deeper blacks and superior viewing angles. Proof of this is the 4ms response time and 144Hz refresh rate, which are excellent, but not the fastest available.

A subtle 1800R curve in the display aids in providing an immersive gaming experience. The XG27VQ also supports AMD's FreeSync, which adapts the monitor's refresh rate on the fly to match your game's frame rate. The result is buttery smooth gaming that looks amazing.

TÜV Rheinland has endorsed the XG27VQ as a flicker-free, low blue light display. What's this mean? The human eye isn't too keen on blue light, which LCDs spew out constantly, resulting in headaches and sore eyes. On some monitors with this feature, the removal of the blue light also introduced flickering in the image, which looked awful. The XG27VQ manages to filter most of the blue light out to protect your eyes, but also doesn't flicker. Win-win!

The XG27VQ supports the same Gameplus features as the PG27VQ and is equally good for multi-display setups.

A raft of display modes Asus called "GameVisuals" are included that when applied change the image to suit the task or game style. FPS mode enhances visibility in dark scenes so you can see enemies, racing mode applies a gamma of 2.2 and a white point of 6500K and the unusual MOBA mode that "enhances the colour of your health bars as well as your opponents to help being them into focus."

For those invested in the Asus Aura Sync lighting system, the XG27VQ is one of the first monitors to be included in the Aura Sync family, with four lighting zones, including ambient lighting behind the monitor. The XG27VQ's metal stand is fully adjustable, allowing modification of the angle, swivel and height of the display. There's a common 100mm x 100mm VESA amount on the rear for use on any standard monitor arm or wall mount.

There's a few FreeSync enabled 144Hz 1080p monitors on the market and many of them are cheaper than the XG27VQ too and some even have better response times. The AOC G2460PF instantly springs to mind. Unless you're keen on a VA panel instead of a TN and are invested in the Asus ROG look or the Aura Sync RGB lighting system, there's better value elsewhere. *ANTHONY AGIUS* PC

> "FPS mode enhances visibility in dark scenes so you can see enemies"

+
- 144Hz
- FreeSync
- Low blue light

-
- Overpriced compared to competition

VERDICT:

For Aura Sync and ROG labelling look no further, for better value, look elsewhere.

7

STREAMING

Avermedia Live Gamer HD 2 Capture Card

'Aver good one

PRICE $289
www.avermedia.com

Every year game streaming gains more and more traction, with Twitch and Youtube streams constantly breaking the previous year's records and more and more people turning to streaming as a career. Just recently Bajo from Good Game left the TV show to start streaming full-time. If someone leaving TV to stream doesn't illustrate the way media is going, nothing will. Aside from having a rig capable of playing and streaming, if you're looking to capture, or steam from a non-PC source, you'll need a capture card. Yes, you can do similar things with most high-end graphics cards, but that impacts system performance. A dedicated card does the heavy lifting and frees up the system for gaming.

The card is driverless, so works right out of the box and is compatible with most (if not all – we couldn't test them all) streaming and capture software. Due to the fact that it's a PCIe card rather than a USB or HDMI device like the majority of common capture devices, the card is almost latency free, meaning that1080p, 60fps, lag-free streaming is the order of the day. The card itself comes with two HDMI ports, one in and one out, and two audio ports with similar function, so a console's input can be run through the PC. The Live Gamer HD 2 is quite expensive when compared to many other capture cards or external devices on the market, but the ease of use, and freedom of choice for how to capture or stream content more than makes up for it.

DANIEL WILKS PC

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

+ • Plug and play
• Almost lag-free
• User freedom

– • Audio limited to 256kbps

VERDICT:
One of the best capture cards on the market.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

9

INPUT

Armaggeddon Alien Craft IV G17 Mouse

You won't miss a thing

PRICE $149.95
www.impactsystems.com.au

The ridiculously named Armaggeddon Alien Craft IV G17 mouse has a number of impressive looking features, or at least these features would have looked impressive when it was released four or so years ago. Unfortunately nowadays, no matter how good these features were then, they just can't justify the price now. The G17 boasts 11 macroable mouse buttons, on-the-fly switching of polling rate, eight levels of DPI adjustment on-the-fly, a weight management system and 512k of onboard memory for macro and profile storage. The chassis is huge but deceptively comfortable, fitting neatly into the hand for a good palm grip, though claw grippers should probably look elsewhere. Button placement is a little awkward, with the DPI and profile switching buttons centred, two forward-mounted buttons on the right hand side and a forward-back scroll bar under the thumb, but after a bit of practise things start to feel a little more natural.

Performance-wise, the Alien Craft IV G17 is a bit of a mixed bag. The Avago 9800 laser sensor is decent, but, like many laser sensors (especially aging ones) suffers from some random acceleration and moments of lag. All in all it's not too bad a mouse, and if it were under $50 we'd recommend it as a rather flashy and feature-packed gaming mouse, but given the fact that there are so many excellent, superior mice around at the $99-$110 price point, it's extremely difficult to justify a $149.95 price tag for an old, outdated product.

DANIEL WILKS PC

+ • Lots of buttons
• Comfortable
• Weight adjustment

– • Average sensor
• Way overpriced

VERDICT:
It would have been good in its day, but now it's an overpriced antique.

5

AUDIO

Roccat Khan Pro

Range life

PRICE $139
roccat.org

At first glance the Khan Pro headset looks like the excellent Roccat Cross, but appearances are deceiving. The basic design is similar, but everything inside the Khan is new. They look small, but the earcups are large enough to fit around most ears and have enough give on two axis to make them sit snug. Inside these earcups sit the most important feature of this new headset – 50mm Hi-Res Audio certifies drivers. The drivers normally seen in gaming headsets, and headsets as a whole offer a frequency range of 20Hz to 20KHz – roughly the range of human perception. Hi-Res drivers offer a far greater range, from 10Hz to 40KHz. While these frequencies are far out of the range of normal human ears, what Hi-Res sound means in theory is that the drivers have more room to deliver sound across the spectrum without distortion.

While the difference isn't quite as great as you might expect, the Khan Pro headset does deliver some very nice and crisp sound across all ranges without suffering from any distortion or muddiness. The bass is good and powerful but not overwhelming. The mic doesn't fare quite so well; it's a bit quiet by default and turning up the gain can lead to some serious environmental noise pickup. We did find a pretty good sweet spot that delivered good chat quality without too much background noise. The mic isn't removable, but it does mute when flipped up. With the Khan Pro, Roccat has made another cracking, well-priced headset. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

+	• 3.5mm jacks • Comfortable • Great sound
-	• Hi-Res certification adds to price • OK mic

VERDICT:
Hi-Res certification definitely adds to the price but they're still good value.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

9

INPUT

Roccat Kone Aimo

Under the thumb

PRICE $99
roccat.org

The wonderful Owl-Eye optical sensor, a highly modified Pixart 3361 sensor tweaked for peak performance in the golden range of 400-3000DPI (the most commonly used range by gamers) once again does the grunt work for Roccat's new Kone Aimo mouse. As with the other Owl-Eye mice we've looked at, the performance is fantastic, with a high degree of smoothness and accuracy across the golden range, making it feel like an extension of your hand, while still maintaining a maximum of 12,000DPI if you really need it.

The Aimo fits in the Kone family in general shape, but the design is definitely different from the Kone Pure and EMP, with the most noticeable addition being a pronounced thumb rest that features a third thumb button. This button is a smart shift, giving a second programmable function to the other mouse buttons, or can be programmed for an individual function itself using the excellent driver software. Having a button literally under your thumb takes some getting used to, but when used as a shift it's clever and intuitive. In gaming it's also proven to be good as an FPS melee button. The other buttons are nice and clicky and well positioned. It's just a well-designed mouse on the whole. It's comfortable for palm grippers and the matte plastic chassis feels good in the hand. I feel a little dirty saying so but even the RGBs look good. The only real problem with the Aimo is that it's in just about the most competitive price range for mice on the market, with the excellent Logitech G502, Asus ROG Gladius, Corsair Glaive and Razer Lancehead all trying to win your favour. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

+	• Excellent sensor • Comfortable • Intuitive shift
-	• For righties only • No weight adjustment

VERDICT:
Another excellent Owl-Eye mouse from Roccat. It's fast becoming our favourite sensor.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

9

INPUT

Steelseries Apex M750 Keyboard

Rather clacky

PRICE $249
steelseries.com

The Apex M750 is a beautifully built keyboard. It's solid, looks great, has some excellent lighting and features Steelseries' proprietary QX2 switches, but even so there are some problems with the keyboard that you may want to consider before making the plunge. The QX2 switches feel great but are better suited for gaming than long term typing due to the travel and actuation distances. The keys move 4mm but the actuation point is only half that. That, combined with the soft actuation force makes it a rather clacky keyboard, so if you're looking for something on the quiet side you may want to opt for different switches. For gaming the short actuation makes the keyboard feel very fast and smooth. Rather than the standard fold out legs to change the angle of the keyboard, the M750 instead uses rubber feet that plug into sockets on the base of the board. This makes the keyboard very stable and the size of the feet makes slipping all but impossible. The lack of a wrist rest, dedicated AV or macro keys or a USB passthrough, and the fact that all the long keys (space, backspace, enter, shift, etc) all feel somewhat loose make it a little hard to justify the rather large price tag, however. The Apex M750 is a good keyboard that is impeccably well-made in what could be considered the Steelseries trademark, but ultimately you're paying a premium for a name rather than features.
DANIEL WILKS PC

+	• QX2 switches • Solidly made • Good lighting
-	• Too expensive • Long keys feel loose • Lacks features

VERDICT:
A well-made keyboard that is priced beyond its features.

8

INPUT

Steelseries Rival 310

Plastic fantastic

PRICE $119
steelseries.com

The Rival 310 is a mouse of contradictions. It delivers some truly incredible performance and accuracy, but perhaps in an effort to keep the price down the build quality and overall feature set feels lacking. The body of the Rival is rough plastic with a large rubber grip on either side. It looks quite good, but due to the fact that the mouse is so light (88g) and there is no way to adjust the weight it feels somewhat flimsy. In addition, the cable isn't braided, and the drivers are a little lacking. On the performance front though, the Rival 310 is a winner. The TrueMove 3 sensor (a modified Pixart 3360 boasts true 1:1 tracking up to 3500 DPI, and serious jitter reduction up to 12,000 DPI. What this means in real world terms is incredible accuracy and speed – just what you want in a gaming mouse. While there is no easy way to set one of the buttons to be a sniper button (instantly throwing the DPI low for increased accuracy), the modified sensor does make the lower DPI ranges incredibly precise, and with the drivers you can fiddle with your presets to swap between. If you care about RGBs, the Rival 310 features two RGB zones – the mouse wheel and a Steelseries logo on the palm rest. The left and right buttons are nice and clicky and the two large thumb buttons are well placed as well. The Rival 310 may feel a little flimsy, but it's an excellent gaming mouse.
DANIEL WILKS PC

+	• TrueMove 3 sensor is great • Extremely accurate
-	• Feels cheap • No braided cable • Drivers lacking

VERDICT:
It feels a little light and plastic, but the performance is fantastic.

8

AUDIO

Armaggeddon Panzer III Elefant 2.1 speakers

Punchy

PRICE $99.95
www.impactsystems.com.au

There's a strange mix of new and old in the Armaggeddon Panzer III speakers. Rather than utilising a banana plug or some kind of proprietary connection between the sub/controller and the satellite speakers, like most other models you'll find in the price range, the Panzer instead uses an old-fashioned coax connection. This connection, while still common in high end audio gear, feels a little out of place in some budget speakers. The satellite speakers don't appear to be shielded in any way either, so you'll want to keep your phone out of range if you don't want static from calls or texts. When it comes to performance, the Panzer III Elefant speakers are a little bit of a mixed bag. The trebles aren't quite as clear as you'd like and can get a little shrill. The mid-range is generally good if unspectacular. The bass is loud and punchy for the most part but it can feel overwhelming at lower bass levels and unfocussed, muddy and boomy at higher levels.

Through a bit of tweaking with the controls located on the sub, we found a pretty good sweet spot with the bass at around 15% and enjoyed some gaming time with the Panzer III speakers. Unfortunately the speakers sit at a very competitive price point, and when compared to something like the excellent (if dull looking) Logitech Z337, the Edifier M1370BT or Edifier Aurora they become a little more difficult to recommend. The design is quite appealing in an industrial way, but the performance just quite isn't there. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

+	• Decent performance • Good volume
-	• Overly boomy bass • Tinny trebles without tweaking

VERDICT:
A decent set of 2.1 speakers but the performance can't compete with some of the competitors in the price range.

7

INPUT

HyperX Alloy FPS Pro

Compact

PRICE $129
www.hyperxgaming.com

We like our keyboards without too many frills, compact, affordable and nice to type on. The Alloy FPS Pro, the latest keyboard from HyperX comfortably ticks all those boxes and then some, making it one of the most elegant, and nice to use keyboards we've seen in a while. Put simply, the Alloy FPS Pro is a tenkeyless model of the already very good Alloy FPS, taking one of the nicest bare bones designs and making it more compact. Again the keyboard utilises real Cherry MX switches, with a choice of the clicky, loud and banned in the office because of the noise Blue switches, silent but tactile Brown and linear Red. Our review model features red switches and they feel great.

Like the Alloy FPS, the keyboard features a naked design, with the switches and keys placed on a hefty and solid feeling back plate. Although small, the keyboard is actually heavier than a number of full sized keyboards, lending it the feeling of real quality. The simple red backlighting of the Alloy FPS returns. For us the straight red backlighting is great, but if you prefer your lighting a little more dynamic you can change the intensity and cycle through effects like breathing or a ripple via the FN button and arrow keys.

While it would have been nice to see HyperX show a little more creativity in design with the FPS Pro, as they did with the FPS Elite, it's still very easy to find the appeal of this keyboard. It's simple, affordable, looks great, is fantastically built and doesn't take up all your desk real estate. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

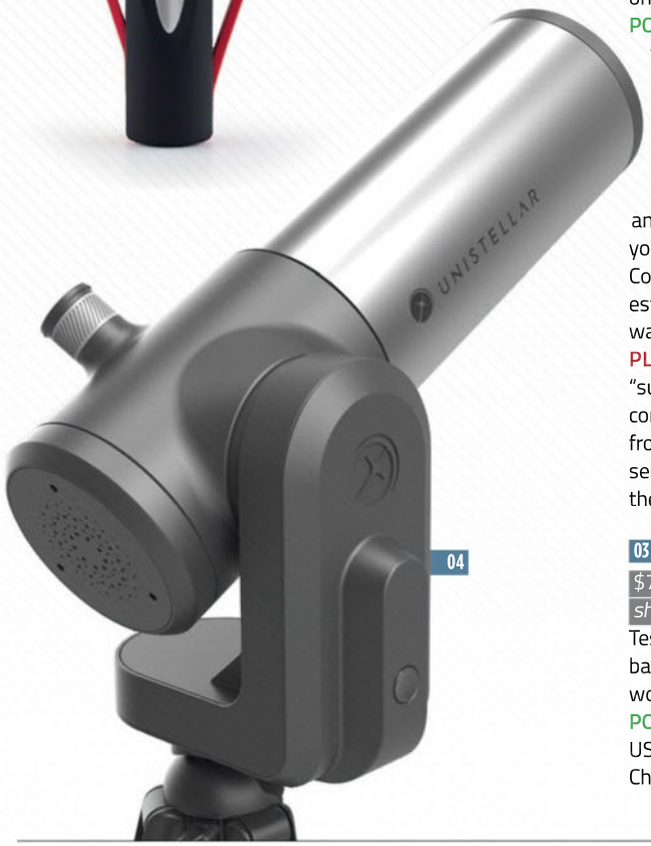
+	• Detachable braided cable • Plug and play • Excellent build quality
-	• Not particularly creative design wise

VERDICT:
An excellent, compact, barebones keyboard that won't break the bank.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

9

HOTWARE 269
with Terrence Jarrad



01 Razer Kiyo
$159.95 ▪ Razer
www.razerzone.com

Streaming is big business, and anyone wanting to make it into a career needs to look the part, using high definition video and quality lighting, and the Kiyo combines both.

POWERED UP: A webcam capable of 1080p at 30fps or 720p at 60fps, with an integrated ring light, adjustable to 12 levels of brightness.

PLAYED OUT: Doesn't have the cool dynamic background removal feature of Razer's previous camera (the Stargazer), and it's on the pricier end of 1080p webcams.

02 Razer Seiren X
$159.95 ▪ Razer
www.razerzone.com

Announced with the Kiyo, the Seiren X proves Razer is indeed doubling down on gear for streamers.

POWERED UP: Supercardioid sound field promises a tighter field than the usual cardioid pattern, resulting in less background noise. Internal built-in shock mount to help resist sound transmitted through vibration or the occasional bump, and continue recording whatever you say in heated gaming moments. Compact design to minimise desk real estate and hopefully stay out of the way of keyboard and mouse.

PLAYED OUT: Only has the "supercardioid" sound field, where comparably priced microphones from vendors like Yeti have multiple selectable sound field options, making them more versatile.

03 Tesla Powerbank
$70 ▪ Tesla
shop.tesla.com

Tesla is in the business of power and batteries, so it makes sense that they would produce a range of power packs.

POWERED UP: 3350mAh capacity. USB, MicroUSB and Lightning cables. Charge status indicator.

PLAYED OUT: Nothing special capacity-wise, so you're mostly paying for a Tesla branded thing, and you'd need to be pretty invested in the brand to do that, when you can drop in to somewhere like JB Hi-Fi and pick up a 5000mAh equivalent for less. And people must be keen, because it's currently sold out.

04 eVscope
$2700 ▪ Unistellar
unistellaroptics.com

Got a hankering to look at the night sky, but don't really know where to look? Let this telescope do it for you!

POWERED UP: Bouncing starlight into your eyes with a 1,000,000:1 contrast ratio, the eVscope has autonomous field detection – a fancy way of saying that it can detect the section of sky it's looking at, and using its motors, align itself to an object of interest, which it also identifies. It'll even connect to your phone to give you details about what it sees as well. And if you want to serve the greater good, if you're in position to observe something scientists want data on, you'll get a message on your phone which transmits coordinates to the eVscope for observation, and you're contributing to research.

PLAYED OUT: Price and features put this in a serious hobbyist domain.

05 OnePlus 5T
$700 ▪ OnePlus
oneplus.net

Long desired for its affordable price point and extensive feature set, OnePlus has released the newest addition to its mobile family.

POWERED UP: Aluminium body, 6-inch AMOLED display, Snapdragon 835, Adreno 540GPU and 8GB RAM. Dual cameras at 16 and 20 megapixels.

PLAYED OUT: Difficult to get here historically, and now. Aussie sales are currently on hold.

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asus.com.au

MEMORY
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SOUND
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cougargaming.com

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We were really hoping that the arrival of the GTX 1070 Ti would shake things up in the Performance machine, but with Galax selling a 1080 for less than the 1070 Ti, there's just no point. Next issue we will have a 1070 Ti roundup, so maybe then...

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bequiet.com

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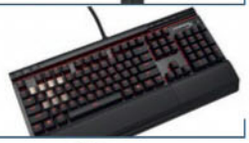

MOUSE
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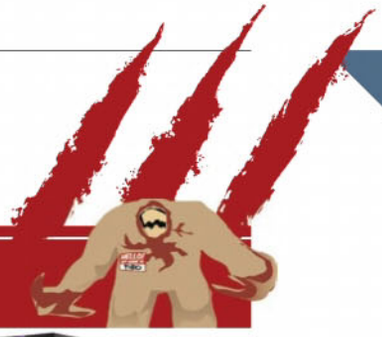
THE BEAST

When overkill is barely enough...



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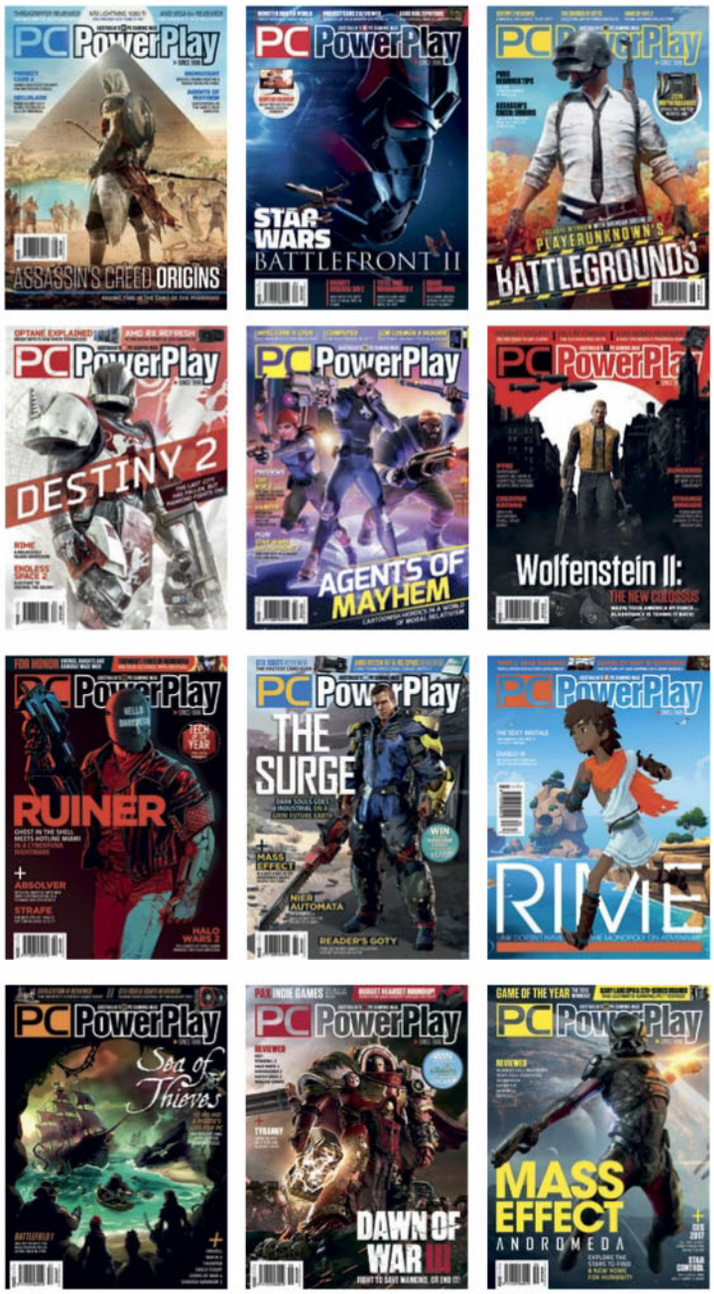

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RATS: NEVER AS DEAD AS THEY LOOK

There were many 'interactive CD-ROMs' published in the FMV heyday of the mid-1990s. But only one of them was based on a grim and cheerless Franz Kafka novella about turning into an insect.

BAD MOJO

DEVELOPERS PULSE ENTERTAINMENT
PERSONALITIES FRANZ KAFKA, NO REALLY
RELEASED 1996
NUTSHELL A criminal entomologist is transported into a cockroach by a magical locket and must survive the deadly filth of a dive bar to unlock four endings, three of which are depressing.

Steven Levy is, today, a super-famous biographer of Steve Jobs and hugely respected journalist with the likes of Wired. Back in 1996 he was on Macworld magazine, and like so many other Mac fans of those dark early days, he completely lost his mind at Bad Mojo because it had full-motion video.

He described it as "an amazing experience" and it's hard to dispute that, in a literal sense anyway. Bad Mojo is an actual no-fooling Kafkaesque comic-tragedy in which entomologist Roger Samms decides to use his research grant money to flee to Mexico, instead of continuing to live in a crap apartment above a terrible, derelict bar.

As he prepares to leave, he messes with an old locket and gets transformed - well, teleported really, his human body remains unconscious on the floor - into a cockroach because of [insert title here]. At this point the player is tasked with guiding little Roger the cockroach around various screens covered in old-school Quicktime events.

What does that mean? It means the player had to move the cockroach to a certain location with/without a certain item in the player inventory. This would trigger playback of a specific Quicktime video. This video was overlayed on the static background, giving a semblance of animation. This is how we did things back in the 1990s and we were grateful!

Older gamers might not remember many of the specifics of the game, but surely they'd remember the infamous rat scenes. A rat, crushed in a classic rat-trap, appears super-dead, but if Roger runs too close, it suddenly finds enough remaining energy to gobble the cockroach whole. "Razor blade rat" is even worse.

Bad Mojo did, to some extent, show hints of what narrative games would one day become. There are four possible endings, related to the ultimate fate of the main human characters.

Essentially this is a story of reconciliation between Roger and his father Eddie. At the beginning of the story, Eddie is Roger's awful landlord and owner of the derelict bar. If Roger, as a cockroach, successfully travels through a secret sewerage system that connects each section of the bar and the apartment above, he will eventually come to understand that Eddie is his father, and the mysterious Oracle inside the locket that transformed him, is his mother.

Eventually, to save a baby cockroach, Roger must blow out the pilot light of a stove, flooding the bar with gas. Obviously there is then a fire and the bar is destroyed (some might say cleansed.)

If Roger leaves Eddie to die, he is arrested for murder and locked up in an asylum for the criminally insane. If Eddie escapes and Roger is left as a cockroach to burn, Eddie ends his days as a homeless drunk. If both die in the fire, they haunt the "urban renewal" project built on the site of the bar.

> "guiding Roger the cockroach around screens covered in old-school Quicktime events"

Only if Roger (as a cockroach) sets off a smoke alarm to alert Eddie to the fire, and then makes it back to the locket, will both men escape.

Only then will Eddie recognise the locket, and come to realise that Roger is his son. The ghost of Angelina - Eddie's wife, Roger's mother - from inside the locket, then explains the situation and the happy family escapes to Belize... with a million bucks of stolen research money.

PC gamers thought all this was pretty good, but Mac gamers loved it. That's mostly because the 1990s was the era of Mac gamers saying: "Sure Quake looks cool, but have you see Myst? Now that has good graphics!"

For the Mac gamer, for some reason, clicking on a static backdrop to trigger a small borderless Quicktime video, was the very height of interactive entertainment.

Or perhaps it was Bad Mojo's literary cred that impressed them? Pulse Entertainment wasn't exactly shy about signposting the links between their story and Kafka's The Metamorphosis. Even the cat in the game is called Franz.

But The Metamorphosis is even grimmer than this. Protagonist Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning as a "giant insect" which causes his family all sorts of problems. Rather than, you know, seek urgent medical care, they complain about his new eating habits (rotten fruit) and even his sister Grete comes to resent the burden he places on the family.

Eventually a couple of boarders freak out about having to live with a giant cockroach, so like any good early 20th century literary character, Gregor crawls off to his room and dies.

His surviving family is relieved and they sell the apartment and head out for a country holiday. Meanwhile, his parents realise his sister Grete has matured into a desirable woman and so they should find her a husband THE END.

From this we can see that Bad Mojo isn't really based on Kafka, except for the part where a dude turns into an insect and nobody seems to give much of a stuff. During the game, Roger must dodge all kinds of peril including his own cat, but at least his father doesn't throw apples at him, hitting him in the back and paralysing him. Which is a thing that happens to Gregor in the original story. Kafka wrote The Metamorphosis in 1916, if that helps? No? Never mind.

Flaky Kafka link aside, of the many many terrible FMV games from the mid-1990s, Bad Mojo was definitely one of the more original and interesting. A solid, self-contained story, decent puzzles, and a unique visual style (especially razor blade rat), all combined into something that lingers, that has become a piece of gaming history.

Stephen Levy was way, way too enthusiastic about it, though. ANTHONY FORDHAM PC

CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

Daniel Wilks is probably going to be blacklisted. Again.

I'm not one to fall for conspiracy theories, not because I'm too smart to fall for them or something self-aggrandising like that, but more because I don't have enough faith that people can keep secrets well enough to cover up large scale conspiracies. More than any other conspiracy, I hate when people talk about false flags – supposed operations carried out by corporations or governments to justify later political or business moves. Sandy Hook was faked so the US government could take all the guns – you know, that kind of bullshit. By and large this thinking angers me, but in recent days, I've really started to turn a corner on this false flag narrative. Not the gun massacres. Those things are real and horrifying and anyone who claims that people who have died or lost loved ones are just actors are monsters who deserve eternal ball kicking. No, I'm looking at one specific instance. I think EA has pulled off a successful PR false flag.

Long story short. When the beta for Star Wars Battlefront II started, there were a few definite problems that proved to be something of a nightmare for PR. Chief amongst these problems was the fact that micro-transactions had a definite, palpable impact on multiplayer performance, essentially making the game pay-to-win. The multiplayer has a card-based power-up system and cards, including special and rare cards, can be purchased with real money transactions. To make matters worse, the overall power level of cards (used for crafting more powerful cards) is based on how many cards the player has, giving even more benefit to players who spend money to buy cards instead of simply playing the game. On top of that the "cost" for unlocking some characters in multiplayer was raised from 10,000 to 60,000. Because the Internet is a thing and Reddit has a sub-Reddit for everything, someone sat down and did some general math to work out how long players would have to grind to get the necessary credit to afford to play Darth Vader. Apparently EA thought around 40 hours of play was a reasonable amount of time to grind to get one of, if not the most iconic character in the Star Wars universe.

Here's where the false flag comes in. A representative from EA then went on Reddit to explain the move.

"The intent is to provide players with a sense of pride and accomplishment for unlocking different heroes.

"As for cost, we selected initial values based upon data from the Open Beta and other adjustments made to milestone rewards before launch. Among other things, we're looking at average per-player credit earn rates on a daily basis, and we'll be making constant adjustments to ensure that players have challenges that are compelling, rewarding, and of course attainable via gameplay.

> EA thought 40 hours of play was a reasonable amount of time to get the most iconic character

"We appreciate the candid feedback, and the passion the community has put forth around the current topics here on Reddit, our forums and across numerous social media outlets.

"Our team will continue to make changes and monitor community feedback and update everyone as soon and as often as we can."

As answers go, it's a bit of a nothing but isn't too inflammatory aside from equating time spent grinding with a sense of accomplishment. But, as we've seen in the past, any time an official rep of a game makes a nothing statement to justify some rather predatory practices, the Internet is quick to react with scorn. The inevitable happened, Reddit kicked up a stink (that said, the massive downvoting is a little unprecedented), and within 24 hours the cost for unlocking Vader went from 60,000 back to 15,000. EA listened. They're the good guys. Yay.

Of course, the rollback to a lower value didn't come without some caveats. The cost of heroes may have been slashed by 75%, but the reward for completing the singleplayer campaign has been dropped by the same percentage, going from 20,000 credits to 5,000. The obvious justification for this is so people don't have access to premium characters as soon as they start playing, but all it really does is reinforce the grind and ensure that if you want to get some lootboxes with cards as well as prestige characters you'll either have to grind for dozens of hours or pay some real world money to stay competitive. Add to this that there is a time gate on credit rewards in the Arcade Mode (after reaching the cap you are locked out of any rewards and progression for a number of hours, much like as was featured in the much-maligned mobile version of Dungeon Keeper, also by EA), and you have more impetus to just stump up cash. For progression in a game you just paid for.

For a hot minute the narrative changed, but thanks to the continued efforts of angry consumers and noted gaming personalities like Jim Sterling, the gaming public wasn't placated for long. The first foray into EA changing the story fell flat, but of course things don't end there. Now EA has temporarily disabled the microtransactions in Battlefront II and changed the story again, transforming themselves, at least in part, from evil empire to beleaguered champion of the gamer. How long this temporary solution will last remains to be seen – hell, by the time you're reading this you may be able to buy cards again – but for the short term at least, EA gets to be the hero that listened to gamers and responded accordingly. It's all great, as long as you ignore the multiple attempts to justify pay-to-win, the fact that people who pre-ordered got an automatic advantage over day one purchasers thanks to early server access and had access to the microtransactions until the day before release, and that the publisher has a history of this kind of behaviour. PC

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